

LESSON PLAN #8: Abigail in Mourning

[1] **Curriculum framework(s):** 8.32 Identify and analyze the point(s) of view in a literary work. 8.33 Analyze patterns of imagery or symbolism and connect them to themes and/or tone and mood.

[2] **Goal of the lesson:** To illustrate the role of illness and death in the 18th century and to notice the author's tone in such emotional states.

[3] **Expected student outcomes:** Students will be able to complete a theme and tone chart based on Abigail's letters expressing grief.

[4] **Assessment of expected student outcomes:** Successful completion of class work.

[5] **Instructional procedures:** 45 minutes

Vocabulary: affliction; perilous; fortitude.

Activities: Note again to the students the ubiquity of illness and death in colonial America due to the lack of early diagnosis and effective treatment of sundry illnesses. Have students look at theme and tone in class, and pay particular attention to Abigail's feelings on death as she writes about her mother's death in 1775 and her father's death in 1783. Even though she saw and experienced death a great deal, she did not write about death with detachment. Have students complete the tone and theme worksheets, but make sure to illustrate the following in a whole group discussion:

- 1) What is the difference between Abigail's reaction to her mother's death and her father's death? Why is it so?
- 2) Note when she writes to John, "My pen is always freer than my tongue. I have wrote many things to you that I suppose I never could have talk'd." (22 October 1775). Why does she write this, and how does it apply to our lives?

Homework: Read the next letters in the unit and complete an Epistolary Analysis handout for them.

[6] **Material and resources:**

- 1) Mourning Tone and Theme handouts
- 2) Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 25 September 1775
- 3) Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 1 October 1775
- 4) Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 9 October 1775
- 5) Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 22 October 1775
- 6) Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 25 October 1775
- 7) Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 20 September 1783

Mourning Tone

Tone is the speaker's or narrator's attitude conveyed in writing. In Abigail's letters to John about the deaths of her father and mother, they convey a particular tone indicating grief. Illustrate how Abigail's tone expresses her grief (and remember that grief can appear in the guise of many different emotions).

Quote	Tone/ Emotion Conveyed	What this Reveals about Abigail

Abigail's Message on Life

Theme is the author's message about life; most often applied to fiction or poetry, we can also apply it to non-fiction. Using Abigail's letters, find evidence of themes in her writings. As always, be sure to support that theme with direct quotes where applicable.

Theme	Quote/Evidence to Support Theme

Student Name _____ Date _____

Epistolary Analysis

Date of letter(s)	Location of letter writer
Sender	Recipient

Topic of letter(s)	
Theme(s) of the letter(s)	
Significant quotes	
Historical details in the letter(s)	

Allusions, metaphors, similes and other figures of speech (give examples)	
Tone	
Images	
Diction	
Evidence of sarcasm or satire	
Vocabulary words	

Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 25 September 1775

Braintree Sepbr. 25 1775

Dearest Friend

I set down with a heavy Heart to write to you. I have had no other since you left me. Woe follows Woe and one affliction treads upon the heel of an other. My distress for my own family having in some measure abated; tis excited anew upon the distress of my dear Mother. Her kindness brought her to see me every day when I was ill and our little Tommy. She has taken the disorder and lies so bad that we have little hopes of her Recovery. She is possess'd with the Idea that she shall not recover, and I fear it will prove but too true.

In this Town the distemper seems to have abated. We have none now so bad as Patty. She has lain 21 days, each day we had reason to think would be her last, but [a] good Constitution, and youth for ought I know will finally conquer the distemper. She is not able to get out of Bed, nor can she help herself any more than a new born infant. Yet their are symptoms which now appear in her favour.

The desolation of War is not so distressing as the Havock made by the pestilence. Some poor parents are mourning the loss of 3, 4 & 5 children, and some families are wholly striped of every Member.

Wherefore is it that we are thus contended with? How much reason have I for thankfulness that all my family are spaired whilst so many others are striped of their parents, their children, their husbands.

O kind Heaven ~~fillegible~~ spair my parents, spair my Dearest Friend and grant him

Health. Continue the lives and health of our dear children. ~~Sister Adams~~ Sister Elihu Adams lost her youngest child last night with this disorder. I can add no more than Supplications for your welfare, and an ardent desire to hear from you by every opportunity. It will alleviate every trouble thro which it may be my Lot to pass. I am most affectionately your distress'd Portia

A scanned image of the original letter is available at the following site:

<http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/aea/cfm/doc.cfm?id=L17750925aa>

Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 1 October 1775

Weymouth october 1 1775

Have pitty upon me, have pitty upon me o! thou my beloved for the Hand of God presseth me soar.

Yet will I be dumb and silent and not open my mouth becaus thou o Lord hast done it.

How can I tell you (o my bursting Heart) that my Dear Mother has Left me, this day about 5 oclock she left this world for an infinitely better.

After sustaining 16 days severe conflict nature fainted and she fell asleep. Blessed Spirit where art thou? At times I almost am ready to faint under this severe and heavy Stroke, seperated from thee who used to be a comfortar towards me in affliction, but blessed be God, his Ear is not heavy that he cannot hear, but he has bid us call upon him in time of Trouble.

I know you are a sincere and hearty mourner with me and will, pray for me in my affliction. My poor father like a firm Believer and a Good christian sets before his children the ~~bests~~ best of Examples of patience and submission. My sisters send their Love to you and are greatly afflicted. You often Express'd your anxiety for me when you left me before, surrounded with Terrors, but my trouble then was as the small ~~drop~~ dust in the balance compaird to what I have since endured. I hope to be properly mindful of the correcting hand, that I may not be rebuked in anger. -- You will pardon and forgive all my wanderings of mind. I cannot be correct.

Tis a dreadful time with this whole province. Sickness and death are in almost every family. I have no more shocking and terrible Idea of any Distemper except the Plague than this.

Almighty God restrain the pestilence which walketh in darkness and wasteth at noon day and which has laid in the dust one of the dearest of parents. May the Life of the other be lengthend out to his afflicted children and Your distressd

Portia

A scanned image of the original letter is available at the following site:

<http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/aea/cfm/doc.cfm?id=L17751001aa>

Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 9 October 1775

Braintree october 9, 1775

I have not been composed enough to write you since Last Sabbath when in the bitterness of my soul, I wrote a few confused lines, since which time it has pleased the great disposer of all Events to add Breach to Breach --

*"Rare are solitary woes, they Love a Train
And tread each others heal."*

The day week that I was call'd to attend a dying parents Bed I was again call'd to mourn the loss of one of my own Family. I have just returnd from attending Patty to the Grave. No doubt long before this will reach you, you have received a melancholy train of Letters in some of which I mention her as dangerously sick. She has lain 5 weeks wanting a few days so bad as that we had little hopes of her Recovery; the latter part of the Time she was the most shocking object my Eyes ever beheld, and so loathsome that it was with the utmost dificulty we could bear the House. A mortification took place a week before she dyed, ~~nothing but duty and humanity could~~ and renderd her a most pityable object. We have great sickness yet in the Town; she made the fourth Corpse that was this day committed to the Ground. We have many others now so bad as to despair of their lives. But Blessed be the Father of Mercies all our family are now well, tho I have my apprehensions least the malignancy of the air in the House may have infected some of them, we have fevers of various kinds, the Throat Distemper as well as the Dysentery prevailing in this and the Neighbouring Towns.

How long o Lord shall the whole land say I am sick? O shew us wherefore it is that thou art thus contending with us? In a very perticular manner I have occasion to make this inquiry who have had Breach upon Breach, nor has one wound been permitted to be healed e'er it is made to Blead affresh, in six weeks I count 5 of my near connections laid in the grave. Your Aunt Simpson died at Milton about ten days ago with the Dysentery.

But the heavy stroke which most of all distresses me is my dear Mother. I cannot overcome my too selfish sorrow, all her tenderness towards me, her care and anxiety for my welfare at all times, her watchfulness over my infant years, her advice and instruction in maturer age; all, all in dear her memory to me, and highten my sorrow for her loss. At the same time I know a patient submission is my duty. I will strive to obtain it! But the lenient hand of time alone can blunt the keen Edg of Sorrow. He who deignd to weep over a departed Friend, will surely forgive a sorrow which at all times desires to be bounded and restrained, by a firm Belief that a Being of infinite wisdom and unbounded Goodness, will carve out my portion in tender mercy towards me! Yea tho he slay me I will trust in him said holy job. What tho his corrective Hand hath been streatched against me; I will not murmer. Tho earthly comforts are taken away I will not repine, he who gave them has surely a right to limit their duration, and has continued them to me much longer than I deserved. I might have been striped of my children as many others have been. I might o! forbid it Heaven, I might have been left a solitary widow.

Still I have many [blessings] left, many comforts to be thankful for, and rejoice in. I am not left to mourn as one without hope.

My dear parent knew in whom she had Believed, and from the first attack of the distemper she was perswaded it would prove fatal to her. A solemnity possess'd her soul, nor could you force a smile from her till she dyed. The violence of her disease soon weakened her so that she was unable to converse, but whenever she could speak, she testified her willingness to leave the world and an intire resignation to the Divine Will. She retaind her senses to the last moment of her Existance, and departed the World with an easy tranquility, trusting in the merrits of a Redeemer. Her passage to immortality was marked with a placid smile upon her countanance, nor was there to be seen scarcely a vestage of the king of Terrors.

*"The sweet remembrance of the just
Shall flourish when they sleep in Dust."
Tis by soothing Grief that it can be healed. "Give Sorrow words."
The Grief that cannot speak
Whispers the o'er fraught heart and bids it Break."*

Forgive me then, for thus dwelling upon a subject sweet to me, but I fear painfull to you. O how I have long'd for your Bosom to pour forth my sorrows there, and find a healing Balm, but perhaps that has been denyed me that I might be led to a higher and a more permamant consolater who has bid us call upon him in the day of trouble.

As this is the first day since your absence that I could write you that we were all well, I desire to mark it with perticular gratitude, and humbly hope that all my warnings and corrections are not in vain.

I most thankfully received your kind favour of the 26 [\[John to Abigail, 26 September 1775\]](#) yesterday. It gives me much pleasure to hear of your Health. I pray Heaven for the continuance of it. I hope for the future to be able to give you more intelegance with regard to what passes out of my own little circle, but such has been my distress that I knew nothing of the political world.

You have doubtless heard of the viliny of one who has professd himself a patriot, but let not that man be trusted who can voilate private faith, and cancel solem covanants, who can leap over moral law, and laugh at christianity. How is he to be bound whom neither honour nor conscience holds? -- We have here a Rumor that Rhodiland has shared the fate of Charlstown -- is this the Day we read of when Satan was to be loosed?

I do not hear of any inhabitants getting out of Town. Tis said Gage is superceeded and How in his place, and that How released the prisoners from Gaoil. Tis also said tho not much credited that Burgoine is gone to Philadelphia.

I hope to hear from you soon. Adieu. Tis almost twelve o clock at Night. I have had so little Sleep that I must bid you good Night. With hearty wishes for your return I am most sincerely Your

Portia

A scanned image of the original letter is available at the following site:
<http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/aea/cfm/doc.cfm?id=L17751009aa>

Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 9 October 1775 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society.

Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 22 October 1775

Braintree october 22 1775

Mr. Lorthorp call'd here this Evening and brought me yours of the 1 of October [\[John to Abigail, 01 October 1775\]](#) a day which will ever be rememberd by me, for it was the most distressing one I ever experienced. That morning I rose and went into my Mothers room, not apprehending her so near her Exit, went to her Bed with a cup of tea in my hand, raised her head to give it to her, she swallowed a few drops, gaspd and fell back upon her pillow, open'd her Eyes with a look that pierced my Heart and which I never shall forget. It was the eagerness of a last look -- "and O! the last sad silence of a Friend."

Yet she lived till 5 oclock that day, but I could not be with her. My dear Father prayed twice beside her Bed that day. God Almighty was with him and suported him that day and enabled him to go thro the Services of ~~that day~~ it. It was his communion day. He had there a tender scene to pass through -- a young Grandaughter Betsy Cranch joining herself to the church, and a Beloved Wife dying to pray for -- weeping children, weeping and mourning parishoners all round him, for every Eye stream'd, his own heart allmost bursting as he spoke. How painful is the recollection, yet how pleasing?

I know I wound your Heart. Why should I? Ought I to give relief to my own by paining yours?

"Yet the Grief that cannot speak

Whispers the o'er fraught heart and bids it burst."

My pen is always freer than my tongue. I have wrote many things to you that I suppose I never could have talk'd.

My Heart is made tender by repeated affliction. It never was a hard Heart. The death of Patty came very near me, having lived four years with me, under my care. I hope it will make me more continually mindful and watchfull of all those who are still committed to my charge.

Tis a great trust. I daily feel more and more of the weight and importance of it, and of my own inability. I wish I could have more of the assistance of my dearest Friend but these perilous times swallow him up.

Mr. Lorthrope has given me this account of the demand upon Falmouth. A Man of War and two tenders went down and sent to the inhabitants to demand their Arms and require them to Stand Nutur, they required time to consider, they gave them till nine o'clock the next day, which time they employed in removing the women, children and the rest of their most valuable Effects out of Danger when they sent their answer in the Negative. Upon which they began a cannonade and were continuing it when the Express came away. --Hitchbourn and an other Gentleman got out of Town in a ~~can~~ small Boat, one of the foggy nights we have had this week. I have not heard what intelligence he brings. An other person says that How enlarged all the prisoners but Lovel and he would not come out.

I have since seen the paraphrase as tis call'd but tis as low as the mock oration tho no reflection upon your private character further than immoderately whipping your Schollers when you kept School, a crime any one will acquit you of who knows you.

As a specimen of the wit and humour it containd I will give you the title -- a paraphrase upon the Second Epistle of John the round Head to James the prolocutor of the Rump parliament. Dear Devil &c.

I had it, but it was when I was in so much distress that I cared nothing about it. I will mention when I see you the foolish conjectures of some who want always to be finding out something extraordinary in what ever happens.

Mr. Cranchs family are well and send Love to you. Your Mother too, is always anxious for you, and is so apprehensive least a fleet should be sent to Bombard Philadelphia that she has not much comfort. Brothers family are well except young Crosby who had the dysentery very bad, and has left him Bereaved of his reason. Isaac is so far recoverd as to return after six weeks and Susy is returnd to me again. Our neighbours are now all getting well.

I hope to hear often from you which is all the alleviation I have of your absence, and is next to seeing you the greatest comfort of your

Portia

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Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 22 October 1775 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society.

Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 25 October 1775

October 25 1775

I have been highly favoured this week past. No less than 5 Letters I have received from you. It is a relief to one to know that we have a Friend who shares our misfortunes and

afflictions with us. Your Letters administer comfort to my wounded Heart. It will sometimes when of of my Gaurd swell and exceed the bounds I endeavour to set to it. It is natural to mourn the loss of any comforts in proportion to the pleasure and satisfaction we derived from them.

Altho I have all immaginable reason to think my dear Mother far happier than she could be in this uncertain perplexing state of existance, and do not [wish] her back again, yet my selfish Heart longs for [her]smiling countanance, her kind advice, her tender care, her prudent Example and her thousand amiable virtues. They are never out of my mind. I am continually recollecting her watchfulness over my infant years, her great care and assiduity to early instill religious principals into her children. Nor did she faill of her duty in her last hours but upon her dying Bed, gave counsel where she thought it most necessary. I wish I could have conversd more with her myself, but such a flood of tenderness would break in upon me that I could never converse with her as leaving me, tho she herself neither smiled nor weept during her whole sickness. Our Little ones were sufficiently affected at the loss of their worthy Grandmamma especially Nabby, and all but Tommy followed her to the Grave.

I am very sensible of ~~your~~ the truth of your observation with regard to their loss. The instructions of my own Grandmamma are as fresh upon my mind this day as any I ever received from my own parents and made as lasting and powerfull impressions. Every virtuous example has powerfull impressions in early youth. Many years of vice and vicious examples do not erase from the mind seeds sown in early life. They take a deep root, and tho often crop'd will spring again.

I have been to day with my Sister Cranch who is very ill, and the Doctor thinks threatned with a fever. I have little respite from trouble -- "Life is a poor play."

Sister Betsy too is very unwell. It continus very sickly in Weymouth. All sorts of fevers, throat distemper and dysenterys prevail. In this Town it has abated.

I have an invitation to dine to morrow with Dr. Franklin, Mr. Bodwin, Dr. Cooper [and] Lady at Coll. Quincys. If my Sister is better believe I shall [accept] of it, as I have a great desire to see Dr. Franklin who I design to ask the favour of taking this.

Poor Falmouth has shared the fate of Charlstown; are we become a Sodom? I would fain hope we are not. Unsearchable are the ways of Heaven who permitteth Evil to befall a city and a people by those very hands who were by them constituted the Gaurdians and protecters of them. We have done Evil or our Enimies would be at peace with us. The Sin of Slavery as well as many others is not washed away.

A deserter came out of Town yesterday and says the General had given orders that no more Bread should be sold to the inhabitants by the Bakers, nor by the Soldiers but if any overplus remaind of their allowance they should return it to the Store and receive their money. Poor poor inhabitants of Boston what will be their fate? A milch Cow was carried into the market and there offerd for sale at a Quarter a dollor per pound. Now and then a poor Creature runs a risk and gets clear.

Mr. Hardwick desires Mr. Bass would not forget his needles, and I would make the same request to you. I wrote for a few articles in the physical way. I assure you medicine is very scarce, the great Demand for it has distressd the Doctors. I would not croud you with articles, but hope you will remember my other bundle of pins, the price of one paper now amounts to what we used to give for a whole Bundle.

Mr. Bass'es Father desires to be rememberd to his Son and to acquaint him that they were all well.

Your worthy Mother also desires her Love to you and is well. Adieu tis late at night, past the midnight hour. I wish for a safe return. You have the honour of a commission of the peace in the house sent to me last week and I hear are appointed Chief justice. Mr. Read is an other of the justices. Who the rest are I have not heard. Once more adieu from yours Without a Signature

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Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 25 October 1775 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society.

Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 20 September 1783

Braintree Sepbr 20 1783

My dearest Friend

Dearer if possible than ever; for all the parental props which once sustaind and supported me are fallen! My Father, my Father, where is he? With Humble confidence I can say; he is with the spirits of just Men made perfect, become an inhabitant of that Country, from whose Bourn no traveller returns.

In my last Letter to you [[Abigail to John, 24 August 1783](#)], I recollect to have particularly mentiond both our dear and venerable parents. My Father then appeard to sustain his age, with fewer of the infirmities of it, than most aged persons are subject to, his Health, his spirits, and his activity were remarkable. He sat out upon a visit to my sister at Haverhill, and with an intention of carrying our son Charles, who had just recoverd from the Measles: he reachd here for the Night, and tho he complaind of having felt rather unwell for a few days, he spent as pleasent and cheerfull an evening as I had known him for many Years. About midnight, I waked with his calling a servant, and desiring him to rise, upon which I rose, and went into his Chamber, I found him in great distress with the strangery; I made every application which I could think of untill morning, but his pain increasing he could neither lie nor set, he insisted upon being carried home. It was with great difficulty to himself, that he reachd his own House, where for 15 days he lived in most exquisite distress, during which time no medicine or outward application procurd

him relief. He supported himself through his distressing pain, and exemplified that Christian patience and fortitude, which he had, through his whole Life taught to others.

*"Here real and, apparent, were the same
We saw the Man, We saw his hold on heaven
A lecture silent, but of sov'reign power!
to vice confusion, but to virtue peace."*

Not a complaint fell from his Lips during his sickness, his reason was clear to the last moment of his Life; every hour of which, he exerted himself, to admonish and warn the youth, who attended round his Bed, intreating them to devote themselves early to their Maker. To them and to others, he was with a most Cheerfull resignation, manifesting the joy and comfort, derived from unfeigned piety; and a Life well Spent; he had a well grounded hope; and his last end was peace.

His affection towards his children and his grandchildren seemed heightened by the Idea, of parting with them.

O my children, said he, you are so kind and tender, I fear you will make me loth to leave you. Through his sickness he was but once heard to say, that he wished it had pleased God to have spared his Life longer, and that was, to have seen the return of my dearest Friend; but tell him says he, I hope to meet him in a better world.

*"The Sweet remembrance of the just,
Shall flourish when they sleep in dust."*

Sweet indeed, is the remembrance of this my dear parent; and his death bed Scene the greatest consolation for his loss. Painfull as it was, I would not have exchanged it, for the triumph of the Greatest Monarch.

*"The Chamber where the good Man meets his Fate
is privileg'd beyond the common walk
of virtuous Life, quite in the verge of Heaven
whatever farce the Boastfull Hero plays,
virtue alone has Majesty in death."*

How trifling, and of how little importance does such a scene, make all the wealth, power and greatness of the world appear. I have; Said my dear parent, made two things the principal Study of my Life, let me injoin the Same upon my Children. I have endeavourd to do all the good I could with the talants committed to me, and to honour God with my substance. Well may his Children rise up; and call him blessed -- gratefully acknowledging the hand which bestowed upon them such a parent, doubling their diligence to walk in his Steps. Like good old Jacob, our parent blessed all his offspring, may our children never forget the Solemn Scene.

"We gaze'd we wept, mixt tears of greif and joy"

I know my dear Friend, you will most sensibly feel this bereavement. You have lost one of your firmest Friends, no man could be more delighted, with your successes, or entertaind

a higher sense of them, than my dear parent, he knew your Worth, and he honourd it at all times. No man was happier in the sons his daughters had given him, two of whom attended him in his last moments, administering to him, those kind offices, which his afflicted daughters could not perform.

*"His God sustaind him in his final hour!
his final hour brought Glory to his God
Mans Glory Heaven vouchsafes to call her own."*

In the midst of my affliction several of your kind Letters were brought me. My Heart I hope was not unthankfull to Heaven for the blessing, but my Mind is not sufficiently calm to reply to them. I shall close this and wait a more tranquil hour; how much do I feel the want of the Soothing kindness of the Friend of my Heart. -- The Idea is too painfull -- adieu.

*Your
Portia*

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