Comparing Literary Works

Comparing Points of View

Narrative point of view is the perspective from which a story is narrated, or told.

- **First-person point of view:** The narrator is a character who participates in the action and uses the first-person pronouns *I* and *me.*

- **Third-person point of view:** The narrator is not a character in the story but a voice outside it. The narrator uses the third-person pronouns *he, she, him, her, they,* and *them* to refer to all characters. There are two kinds of third-person point of view. In the **third-person omniscient point of view,** the narrator knows everything, including the thoughts of all the characters. In the **third-person limited point of view,** the narrator sees and reports things through one character's eyes.

These selections are written using different points of view. As you read, complete a Venn diagram like this one to compare and contrast how the point of view affects the way you understand the characters and the plot of each story.

Cultural perspective is another, related, element of many literary works. A character’s point of view can be strongly influenced by the customs and beliefs of the place and time in which he or she lives. Notice how the perspective of the girl in each story—one an American teenager and the other an African child—is affected by her culture’s ideas and attitudes about the roles of women.

Checkouts • The Girl Who Can

Uses third-person pronouns

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Common Core State Standards

Reading Literature
6. Analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of literature from outside the United States, drawing on a wide reading of world literature.

Writing
2.a. Introduce a topic; organize complex ideas, concepts, and information to make important connections and distinctions; include formatting, graphics, and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension.
Can truth change?

Writing About the Big Question

Although the characters in these stories seem sure of certain things, when circumstances change, new possibilities—and new questions—emerge. Use these sentence starters to develop your ideas about the Big Question.

People may have assumptions about others or themselves based on _________.

Those beliefs can be changed when _________.

Meet the Authors

Cynthia Rylant (b. 1954)
Author of “Checkouts”

Cynthia Rylant spent four years as a child living with her grandparents in a small town in West Virginia. With no public library and little money to buy books, she started reading comic books. Once in college, she discovered great literature, but she did not consider becoming a writer until she took a job as a librarian and began reading children’s books.

Writing About Her Life In her work, Rylant draws upon her experiences as a young adult. “The best writing,” she says, “is that which is most personal, most revealing.” She has written many award-winning stories, poems, and novels.

Ama Ata Aidoo (b. 1942)

Author of “The Girl Who Can”

Ama Ata Aidoo was born in Ghana, Africa, where her father was a village chief. He wanted his daughter to have a Western education and sent her to a university in Cape Coast, Ghana. Aidoo earned her bachelor’s degree in English and later taught at universities in Ghana and the United States.

Works and Themes Aidoo has written plays, short stories, poetry, and novels. Her fiction, written in English, often explores the conflicts between Western and African cultures and the roles of women in modern society.
Her parents had moved her to Cincinnati, to a large house with beveled glass windows and several porches and the history her mother liked to emphasize. You’ll love the house, they said. You’ll be lonely at first, they admitted, but you’re so nice you’ll make friends fast. And as an impulse tore at her to lie on the floor, to hold to their ankles and tell them she felt she was dying, to offer anything, anything at all, so they might allow her to finish growing up in the town of her childhood, they firmed their mouths and spoke from their chests and they said, It’s decided.

They moved her to Cincinnati, where for a month she spent the greater part of every day in a room full of beveled glass windows, sifting through photographs of the life she’d lived and left behind. But it is difficult work, suffering, and in its own way a kind of art, and finally she didn’t have the energy for it anymore, so she emerged from the beautiful house and fell in love with a bag boy at the supermarket. Of course, this didn’t happen all at once, just like that, but in the sequence of things that’s exactly the way it happened.

She liked to grocery shop. She loved it in the way some people love to drive long country roads, because doing it she could think and relax and wander. Her parents wrote up the list and handed it to her and off she went without complaint to perform what they regarded as a great sacrifice of her time and a sign that she was indeed a very nice girl. She had never told them how much she loved grocery shopping, only that she was “willing” to do it. She had an intuition which told her that her parents were not safe for sharing such strong, important facts about herself. Let them think they knew her.
Once inside the supermarket, her hands firmly around the handle of the cart, she would lapse into a kind of **reverie** and wheel toward the produce. Like a Tibetan monk in solitary meditation, she calmed to a point of deep, deep happiness; this feeling came to her, reliably, if strangely, only in the supermarket.

Then one day the bag boy dropped her jar of mayonnaise and that is how she fell in love.

He was nervous—first day on the job—and along had come this fascinating girl, standing in the checkout line with the unfocused stare one often sees in young children, her face turned enough away that he might take several full looks at her as he packed sturdy bags full of food and the goods of modern life. She interested him because her hair was red and thick, and in it she had placed a huge orange bow, nearly the size of a small hat. That was enough to distract him, and when finally it was her groceries he was packing, she looked at him and smiled and he could respond only by busting her jar of mayonnaise on the floor, shards of glass and oozing cream decorating the area around his feet.

She loved him at exactly that moment, and if he’d known this perhaps he wouldn’t have fallen into the brown depression he fell into, which lasted the rest of his shift. He believed he must have looked the fool in her eyes, and he envied the sureness of everyone around him: the cocky cashier at the register, the grim and harried store manager, the bland butcher, and the brazen bag boys who smoked in the warehouse on their breaks. He wanted a second chance. Another chance to be confident and say witty things to her as he threw tin cans into her bags, persuading her to allow him to help her to her car so he might learn just a little about her, check out the floor of the

**Literary Analysis**

**Point of View**

How does the use of pronouns in this paragraph show that this story is being told from the third-person point of view?

**Vocabulary**

**reverie** (rev’ ə ré) *n.*
dreamy thinking and imagining

**Reading Check**

At first, why does the girl fascinate the boy?
car for signs of hobbies or fetishes and the bumpers for clues as to beliefs and loyalties.

But he busted her jar of mayonnaise and nothing else worked out for the rest of the day.

Strange, how attractive clumsiness can be. She left the supermarket with stars in her eyes, for she had loved the way his long nervous fingers moved from the conveyor belt to the bags, how deftly (until the mayonnaise) they had picked up her items and placed them in her bags. She had loved the way the hair kept falling into his eyes as he leaned over to grab a box or a tin. And the tattered brown shoes he wore with no socks. And the left side of his collar turned in rather than out.

The bag boy seemed a wonderful contrast to the perfectly beautiful house she had been forced to accept as her home, to the history she hated, to the loneliness she had become used to, and she couldn’t wait to come back for more of his awkwardness and dishevelment.

Incredibly, it was another four weeks before they saw each other again. As fate would have it, her visits to the supermarket never coincided with his schedule to bag. Each time she went to the store, her eyes scanned the checkouts at once, her heart in her mouth. And each hour he worked, the bag boy kept one eye on the door, watching for the red-haired girl with the big orange bow.

Yet in their disappointment these weeks there was a kind of ecstasy. It is reason enough to be alive, the hope you may see again some face which has meant something to you. The anticipation of meeting the bag boy eased the girl’s painful transition into her new and jarring life in Cincinnati. It provided for her an anchor amid all that was impersonal and unfamiliar, and she spent less time on thoughts of what she had left behind as she concentrated on what might lie ahead. And for the boy, the long and often tedious hours at the supermarket which provided no challenge other than that of showing up the following workday. . . . these hours became possibilities of mystery and romance for him as he watched the electric doors for the girl in the orange bow.

And when finally they did meet up again, neither offered a clue to the other that he, or she, had been the object of obsessive thought for weeks. She spotted him as soon as she came into the store, but she kept her eyes strictly in front of her as she pulled out a cart and wheeled it toward the produce. And he, too, knew the instant she came through the door—though the orange bow was gone, replaced by a small but bright yellow flower instead—and he never once turned his head in her direction but watched her from the corner of his vision as he tried to swallow back the fear in his throat.

It is odd how we sometimes deny ourselves the very pleasure we have longed for and which is finally within our reach. For
some **perverse** reason she would not have been able to articulate, the girl did not bring her cart up to the bag boy’s checkout when her shopping was done. And the bag boy let her leave the store, pretending no notice of her.

This is often the way of children, when they truly want a thing, to pretend that they don’t. And then they grow angry when no one tried harder to give them this thing they so casually rejected, and they soon find themselves in a rage simply because they cannot say yes when they mean yes. Humans are very complicated. (And perhaps cats, who have been known to react in the same way, though the resulting rage can only be guessed at.)

The girl hated herself for not checking out at the boy’s line, and the boy hated himself for not catching her eye and saying hello, and they most sincerely hated each other without having ever exchanged even two minutes of conversation.

Eventually—in fact, within the week—a kind and intelligent boy who lived very near her beautiful house asked the girl to a movie and she gave up her fancy for the bag boy at the supermarket. And the bag boy himself grew so bored with his job that he made a desperate search for something better and ended up in a bookstore where scores of fascinating girls lingered like honeybees about a hive. Some months later the bag boy and the girl with the orange bow again crossed paths, standing in line with their dates at a movie theater, and, glancing toward the other, each smiled slightly, then looked away, as strangers on public buses often do, when one is moving off the bus and the other is moving on.

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**Critical Thinking**

1. **Key Ideas and Details** *(a)* What do the boy and girl think about while they are apart? *(b)* Speculate: How do you think the two characters feel when they see each other at the movie theater?

2. **Key Ideas and Details** **Draw Conclusions**: Does the experience described in the story seem like a missed opportunity or a necessary outcome? Explain.

3. **Key Ideas and Details** *(a)* Summarize: Why do the boy and girl never act on their feelings? *(b)* Make a Judgment: Do you agree that “humans are very complicated”? Explain, using details from the story.

4. **Integration of Knowledge and Ideas** *(a)* Is the situation described in this story a common cultural experience for American teenagers? Explain. *(b)* Speculate: How might the story be different if it were set in a culture that limits the independence of teenage girls? *(Connect to the Big Question: Can truth change?)*
The Girl Who Can
Ama Ata Aidoo
hey that I was born in Hasodzi; and it is a very big
village in the central region of our country, Ghana. They
also say that when all of Africa is not choking under a
drought, Hasodzi lies in a very fertile lowland in a district
known for its good soil. Maybe that is why any time I don’t finish
eating my food, Nana says, “You Adjoa, you don’t know what life is
about . . . you don’t know what problems there are in this life . . .”

As far as I could see, there was only one problem. And it had
nothing to do with what I knew Nana considered as “problems,”
or what Maami thinks of as “the problem.” Maami is my mother.
Nana is my mother’s mother. And they say I am seven years old.
And my problem is that at this seven years of age, there are things
I can think in my head, but which, maybe, I do not have the proper
language to speak them out with. And that, I think, is a very
serious problem because it is always difficult to decide whether to
keep quiet and not say any of the things that come into my head, or
say them and get laughed at. Not that it is easy to get any grown-
up to listen to you, even when you decide to take the risk and say
something serious to them.

Take Nana. First, I have to struggle to catch her attention. Then
I tell her something I had taken a long time to figure out. And then
you know what always happens? She would at once stop whatever
she is doing and, mouth open, stare at me for a very long time.
Then, bending and turning her head slightly, so that one ear comes
down towards me, she’ll say in that voice: “Adjoa, you say what?”
After I have repeated whatever I had said, she would either, still in
that voice, ask me “never, never, but NEVER to repeat THAT,” or she
would immediately burst out laughing. She would laugh and laugh
and laugh, until tears run down her cheeks and she would stop
whatever she is doing and wipe away the tears with the hanging
edges of her cloth. And she would continue laughing until she is
completely tired. But then, as soon as another person comes by,
just to make sure she doesn’t forget whatever it was I had said,
she would repeat it to her. And then, of course, there would be two
old people laughing and screaming with tears running down their
faces. Sometimes this show continues until there are three, four or
even more of such laughing and screaming tear-faced grownups.
And all that performance for whatever I’d said? I find something
quite confusing in all this. That is, no one ever explains to me why
sometimes I shouldn’t repeat some things I say; while at other times,
some other things I say would not only be all right, but would be
considered so funny they would be repeated so many times for so
many people’s enjoyment. You see how neither way of hearing me
out can encourage me to express my thoughts too often?
Like all this business to do with my legs. I have always wanted to tell them not to worry. I mean Nana and my mother. It did not have to be an issue for my two favorite people to fight over. I didn’t want to be told not to repeat it or for it to be considered so funny that anyone would laugh at me until they cried. After all, they were my legs . . . When I think back on it now, those two, Nana and my mother must have been discussing my legs from the day I was born. What I am sure of is that when I came out of the land of sweet, soft silence into the world of noise and comprehension, the first topic I met was my legs.

That discussion was repeated very regularly.

Nana: “Ah, ah, you know, Kaya, I thank my God that your very first child is female. But Kaya, I am not sure about her legs. Hm . . . hm . . . hm . . .”

And Nana would shake her head.

Maami: “Mother, why are you always complaining about Adjoa’s legs? If you ask me . . .”

Nana: “They are too thin. And I am not asking you!”

Nana has many voices. There is a special one she uses to shut everyone up.

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“Some people have no legs at all,” my mother would try again with all her small courage.

“But Adjoa has legs,” Nana would insist; “except that they are too thin. And also too long for a woman. Kaya, listen. Once in a while, but only once in a very long while, somebody decides — nature, a child’s spirit mother, an accident happens, and somebody gets born without arms, or legs, or both sets of limbs. And then let me touch wood; it is a sad business. And you know, such things are not for talking about every day. But if any female child decides to come into this world with legs, then they might as well be legs.”

“What kind of legs?” And always at that point, I knew from her voice that my
mother was weeping inside. Nana never heard such inside weeping. Not that it would have stopped Nana even if she had heard it. Which always surprised me. Because, about almost everything else apart from my legs, Nana is such a good grown-up. In any case, what do I know about good grown-ups and bad grown-ups? How could Nana be a good grown-up when she carried on so about my legs? All I want to say is that I really liked Nana except for that.

Nana: “As I keep saying, if any woman decides to come into this world with her two legs, then she should select legs that have meat on them: with good calves. Because you are sure such legs would support solid hips. And a woman must have solid hips to be able to have children.”

“Oh, Mother.” That’s how my mother would answer. Very, very quietly. And the discussion would end or they would move on to something else.

Sometimes, Nana would pull in something about my father:

How, “Looking at such a man, we have to be humble and admit that after all, God’s children are many . . .”

How, “After one’s only daughter had insisted on marrying a man like that, you still have to thank your God that the biggest problem you got later was having a granddaughter with spindly legs that are too long for a woman, and too thin to be of any use.”

The way she always added that bit about my father under her breath, she probably thought I didn’t hear it. But I always heard it. Plus, that is what always shut my mother up for good, so that even if I had not actually heard the words, once my mother looked like even her little courage was finished, I could always guess what Nana had added to the argument.

“Legs that have meat on them with good calves to support solid hips . . . to be able to have children.”

So I wished that one day I would see, for myself, the legs of any woman who had had children. But in our village, that is not easy. The older women wear long wrap-arounds1 all the time. Perhaps if they let me go bathe in the river in the evening, I could have checked. But I never had the chance. It took a lot of begging just to get my mother and Nana to let me go splash around in the shallow end of the river with my friends, who were other little girls like me. For proper baths, we used the small bathhouse behind our hut. Therefore, the only naked female legs I have ever really seen are those of other little girls like me, or older girls in the school. And those of my mother and Nana: two pairs of legs which must surely belong to the approved kind; because Nana gave birth to my mother

1. wrap-arounds (rap’ ə roundz’) n. a type of garment that is open down the side and is wrapped around the body.
and my mother gave birth to me. In my eyes, all my friends have got legs that look like legs, but whether the legs have got meat on them to support the kind of hips that . . . that I don’t know.

According to the older boys and girls, the distance between our little village and the small town is about five kilometers. I don’t know what five kilometers mean. They always complain about how long it is to walk to school and back. But to me, we live in our village, and walking those kilometers didn’t matter. School is nice. School is another thing Nana and my mother discussed often and appeared to have different ideas about. Nana thought it would be a waste of time. I never understood what she meant. My mother seemed to know—and disagreed. She kept telling Nana that she—that is, my mother—felt she was locked into some kind of darkness because she didn’t go to school. So that if I, her daughter, could learn to write and read my own name and a little besides—perhaps be able to calculate some things on paper—that would be good. I could always marry later and maybe . . .

Nana would just laugh. “Ah, maybe with legs like hers, she might as well go to school.”

Running with our classmates on our small sports field and winning first place each time never seemed to me to be anything about which to tell anyone at home. This time it was different. I don’t know how the teachers decided to let me run for the junior section of our school in the district games. But they did.

When I went home to tell my mother and Nana, they had not believed it at first. So Nana had taken it upon herself to go and “ask into it properly.” She came home to tell my mother that it was really true. I was one of my school’s runners.

“Is that so?” exclaimed my mother. I know her. Her mouth moved as though she was going to tell Nana, that, after all, there was a secret about me she couldn’t be expected to share with anyone. But then Nana herself looked so pleased, out of surprise, my mother shut her mouth up. In any case, since the first time they heard the news, I have often caught Nana staring at my legs with a strange look on her face, but still pretending like she was not looking. All this week, she has been washing my school uniform herself. That is a big surprise. And she didn’t stop at that,
LITERATURE IN CONTEXT

Social Studies Connection

Country Profile: Ghana

Location: southern coast of West Africa bordering the Atlantic Ocean

Climate: tropical; wet in the south and dry in the north

Terrain: low fertile plains and plateaus

Population: 20.2 million

Connect to the Literature

Adjoa says that she lives in a fertile lowland of central Ghana. What benefits and challenges might this region’s climate and terrain present for a runner like Adjoa?

she even went to Mr. Mensah’s house and borrowed his charcoal pressing iron. Each time she came back home with it and ironed and ironed and ironed the uniform, until, if I had been the uniform, I would have said aloud that I had had enough.

Wearing my school uniform this week has been very nice. At the parade, on the first afternoon, its sheen caught the rays of the sun and shone brighter than anybody else’s uniform. I’m sure Nana saw that too, and must have liked it. Yes, she has been coming into town with us every afternoon of this district sports week. Each afternoon, she has pulled one set of fresh old cloth from the big brass bowl to wear. And those old clothes are always so stiffly starched, you can hear the cloth creak when she passes by. But she walks way behind us schoolchildren. As though she was on her own way to some place else.

Yes, I have won every race I ran for my school, and I have won the cup for the best all-round junior athlete. Yes, Nana said that she didn’t care if such things are not done. She would do it. You know what she did? She carried the gleaming cup on her back. Like they do with babies, and other very precious things. And this time, not taking the trouble to walk by herself.

Spiral Review

Theme How does Nana’s behavior toward Adjoa connect to a possible theme?

Reading Check

After learning about her running talent, what does Nana do with the narrator’s uniform?
When we arrived in our village, she entered our compound to show the cup to my mother before going to give it back to the headmaster.

Oh, grown-ups are so strange. Nana is right now carrying me on her knee, and crying softly. Muttering, muttering, muttering that: “saa, thin legs can also be useful... thin legs can also be useful...” that “even though some legs don’t have much meat on them, to carry hips... they can run. Thin legs can run... then who knows...”

I don’t know too much about such things. But that’s how I was feeling and thinking all along. That surely, one should be able to do other things with legs as well as have them because they can support hips that make babies. Except that I was afraid of saying that sort of thing aloud. Because someone would have told me never, never, but NEVER to repeat such words. Or else, they would have laughed so much at what I’d said, they would have cried.

It’s much better this way. To have acted it out to show them, although I could not have planned it.

As for my mother, she has been speechless as usual.

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1. **Key Ideas and Details**
   (a) Why does Nana criticize the narrator’s legs?
   (b) **Draw Conclusions**: How does this criticism reveal Nana’s fears for the narrator’s future? Explain.

2. **Integration of Knowledge and Ideas**
   (a) What are Nana’s feelings about the narrator going to school?
   (b) **Compare and Contrast**: How do the mother’s feelings about school differ from Nana’s?
   (c) **Make Generalizations**: Based on these details, what kind of lives do you think many women in Ghana are expected to lead?

3. **Key Ideas and Details**
   (a) **Infer**: After Adjoa is chosen for the district games, why does Nana keep staring at her legs?
   (b) **Draw Conclusions**: Why does Nana iron Adjoa’s school uniform so carefully?

4. **Key Ideas and Details**
   (a) **Analyze**: At the end of the story, Adjoa says it was much better to “have acted it out to show them.” What has she acted out?
   (b) **Evaluate**: Was it “better,” as Adjoa says? Explain.

5. **Integration of Knowledge and Ideas**
   Do the narrator’s legs mean the same thing to her and her family at the end of the selection as they do at the beginning? Use details to support your answer. [Connect to the Big Question: Can truth change?]
Comparing Points of View

1. **Key Ideas and Details** Use a chart like the one shown to note the actions, thoughts, and feelings of the listed characters in both stories.

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<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Actions</th>
<th>Thoughts</th>
<th>Feelings</th>
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<td>Girl</td>
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2. **Craft and Structure**

(a) Which details from your chart show that the third-person omniscient point of view in “Checkouts” gives readers insight into the inner lives of all the characters? Explain.

(b) Which details show that the first-person point of view in “The Girl Who Can” lets the reader understand the narrator best of all? Explain.

Timed Writing

Explanatory Text: Essay

Compare and contrast the girl in “Checkouts” and the narrator in “The Girl Who Can.” In an essay, analyze the way in which the works of fiction are shaped by the narrators’ points of view and cultural perspectives, and explain how those influences affect your attitude toward each girl. Do you trust each girl equally? Why or why not? (30 minutes)

5-Minute Planner

1. Read the prompt carefully and completely.

2. Organize your ideas to make important connections by answering these questions:
   - Who are the narrators in the two stories?
   - How do you know what each girl is thinking?
   - Do both narrators seem equally reliable? Why or why not?
   - How does each girl’s culture influence her perspective?

3. Reread the prompt, and then draft your essay.