

Model Narratives

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will apply what you have learned about narrative language, elements, and structure by examining samples from two narrative works. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper"
2. Zitkala-Sa's *American Indian Stories*
3. Comparison and Contrast

1. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper"

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was an American writer and feminist activist during the late 19th and early 20th century. She is primarily known for her short story "The Yellow Wallpaper," published in 1892. While some of the story is fictional, much of it is drawn from her own experience with postpartum depression. Her purpose in writing the story was to draw attention to the misconceptions about women who suffered from mental illness, and the patronizing treatment they were often subjected to.

Read the following excerpt from "The Yellow Wallpaper," which comes from a passage near the beginning of the story in which the narrator is describing her husband's opinion of her illness:

John is practical in the extreme. He has no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and he scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures.

John is a physician, and perhaps—(I would not say it to a living soul, of course, but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind)—perhaps that is one reason I do not get well faster.

You see, he does not believe I am sick!

And what can one do?

If a physician of high standing, and one's own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency—what is one to do?

First, consider the rhetorical situation of this excerpt. You know that Gilman was writing a story, so her primary goal was to tell readers about something that happened. However, she is also writing about a certain dynamic between the narrator and her husband. To a great extent, it can be said that, in this passage, Gilman is not just beginning a story but also providing context about the sexism that women experienced at the time.

Next, let's consider how this narrative works. Even though you don't have all of Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" before you, you can see how she used several narrative techniques to her advantage.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** She does a good job of establishing the characters and unfolding plot line. She quickly lets readers know that the narrator feels misunderstood by her husband and uneasy about her current situation. This creates tension in the narrative early on, leaving readers eager to find out the answer to the narrator's question: "What is one to do?"

This excerpt is a good example of how a masterfully written narrative can communicate a great deal in a few lines—because it *shows* rather than *tells*. Readers are encouraged to deepen their understanding of the passage; by doing so, they become more engaged in the narrative.

2. Zitkala-Sa's *American Indian Stories*

Zitkala-Sa was a Dakota (Sioux) writer, teacher, and political activist, who wrote during a period when American society was becoming aware of the atrocities that had been committed—and continued to be committed—against native people.

Zitkala-Sa's most well-known work, *American Indian Stories*, tells of her experiences in an "Indian boarding school" during the late 19th century. These schools were facilities in which Native American children were subjected to a program of education and cultural indoctrination designed to assimilate them into American society.

This excerpt, from a selection entitled "The Cutting of My Long Hair," describes Zitkala-Sa's initial reaction to the school.

The first day in the land of apples was a bitter-cold one; for the snow still covered the ground, and the trees were bare. A large bell rang for breakfast, its loud metallic voice crashing through the belfry overhead and into our sensitive ears. The annoying clatter of shoes on bare floors gave us no peace. The constant clash of harsh noises, with an undercurrent of many voices murmuring an unknown tongue, made a bedlam within which I was securely tied. And though my spirit tore itself in struggling for its lost freedom, all was useless.



What is Zitkala-Sa's purpose for writing this piece? She's clearly explaining her experience to readers, but what else does she want to accomplish?

Zitkala-Sa was raised in a Dakota (Sioux) village but was taught English and American ways of writing and thinking at the Indian school. As a result of her experiences, she gained a unique perspective—one that she uses to tell her story effectively. Zitkala-Sa doesn't just inform non-native readers about what she's endured, she tells them what it meant to her, and to thousands of other children like her, to be taken from her family and confined to a place that was so foreign that it might as well have been on a different planet.

Although Zitkala-Sa's narrative is different from Gilman's, she uses the elements of narrative writing in similar ways to create a powerful scene. Zitkala-Sa describes that scene vividly, communicating the discomfort and terror she felt. She transforms what might have seemed like a harmless setting—a boarding school—into a place of incomprehensible terror. By means of her childhood perspective, Zitkala-Sa enables readers to hear and see what she heard and saw, and to feel what she felt.

Although she is an accomplished writer of the English language, Zitkala-Sa describes spoken English as one of the many unfamiliar (and frightening) sounds she heard at the school. By doing so, she "shows" readers how far from home she feels—how far from home, in so many ways, she is.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** Zitkala-Sa uses figurative language to convey the emotional truth of her situation when she writes that the sounds "made a bedlam within which I was securely tied." She lets readers know how powerful these new sounds were to her, and how powerless she was to withstand them after she had been separated from her family and her previous life.

3. Comparison and Contrast

What similarities and differences did you notice in the excerpts from the life stories of these two writers? Although the writers came from different backgrounds and had different experiences, do the two passages have anything in common?

Both writers intended to convey not only what certain situations were like for them in particular, but what it would be like to be them in those situations. Both of these narratives invite readers to share the experiences they relate.

There are also differences between these narratives. Zitkala-Sa uses the "perspective gap"—between who she was at the time she wrote and who she was when she lived the events. Gilman's story feels more "immediate," as it is happening in the narrator's adult life. Zitkala-Sa wrote about an attempt to make her a different person, at the expense of her childhood self. All aspects of the boarding school, including the buildings and the teachers, were part of a system to turn Native Americans into "Americans," no matter the cost. Gilman wrote about an attempt to turn her back into the person she thought she was before she became ill.

Additionally, in the excerpt from her work, Zitkala-Sa goes to great lengths to make readers "see" what it was like to endure the assimilation process. By making the victim's suffering real for readers, she makes a powerful

case for reform of that process. Gilman uses figurative language like similes and metaphors to demonstrate how the narrator's suffering is reflected in her surroundings.

As you can see, the narrative techniques used by both writers can be adapted to accomplish a range of objectives in written work. By comparing these narratives, you can gain insight into each of them—and their writers.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that careful reading of personal narratives can reveal the writers' intentions and assumptions. By examining selections from **Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper"** and **Zitkala-Sa's *American Indian Stories*** and engaging in a **comparison and contrast** between them, you saw how different narratives written for different purposes by different writers make use of similar skills, techniques, and approaches to establish a relationship between the writers and readers.

Best of luck in your learning!

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