Grades 11–12 Playlist: Analyzing the Impact of an Author's Choices

Aligns with CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.3:

- Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

Welcome

Authors must make a host of choices when developing ideas and crafting a story's elements. They decide on settings, make choices about the characters' dialogue, and structure the sequence of events that happen in the story. By analyzing these choices, skilled readers are able to look "behind the scenes" and determine why an author included a specific story element or chose a particular style of storytelling. This analysis gives the reader a better understanding of how the author's choices affect the final text.

Objectives

In this playlist, students will learn how to:

- analyze an author's choices regarding the development of literary elements in a story.

- determine the impact of an author's choices on the story and the reader.

Review

Key Terms

- The **general setting** is the time and place in which the action of a story takes place.

- The **plot** is the arrangement of the action in a story.

Exploring the Standard

A great deal of careful decision-making goes into a strong piece of writing. If authors make arbitrary choices about story elements like character development and the order of events, the final work will suffer as a result. For example, a story with a random or unspecified setting will be confusing to a reader and may make the author appear careless or inexperienced. Strong authors strive to make meaningful storytelling decisions that help improve the experience for the reader.

Examining an author's choices can lead to a much deeper understanding of a text. For example, the physical description of a character could contain subtle clues about that character's personality traits or motivations that might play a larger role later in the story.

When trying to determine how an author's choices impact the text and the way it is read, ask questions like the following:

- How does the setting of the story create a particular mood?

- Why did the author choose to structure the events of the story in this order?

- What choices cause the reader to like or dislike each character?

- What does a particular description or line of dialogue reveal about a certain character that the reader would not know otherwise?

A Closer Look: Analyzing Choices and Determining Their Impact

When examining a text, it's helpful to make connections between the author's choices and their impact on the story as a whole. Remember that authors make conscious decisions when developing a text—there is a reason why the story begins the way it does and why characters behave a certain way. To better understand these choices, try to identify the methods of development an author uses, such as characterization, sequence of events, tone, humor, sarcasm, irony, and tone.

Example

In this excerpt from Chapter 1 of "A Double Barrelled Detective Story" by Mark Twain, the reader is introduced to a newly married couple whose union was opposed by the girl's father. While reading, pay close attention to the choices Twain makes at the beginning of the text to establish the tension of the scene. How does the author hook the reader's interest early on? Which choices directly impact the reader's understanding of the text? How is the husband characterized, and what allows the reader to reach this conclusion?

Listen!

Listen to an audio recording of "A Double Barrelled Detective Story":

- https://librivox.org/a-double-barreled-detective-story-by-mark-twain/

[1] The first scene is in the country, in Virginia; the time, 1880. There has been a wedding, between a handsome young man of slender means and a rich young girl—a case of love at first sight and a precipitate marriage; a marriage bitterly opposed by the girl's widowed father.

[2] Jacob Fuller, the groom, is twenty-six years old, is of an old but unconsidered family. […] The bride is nineteen and beautiful. She is intense, high-strung, romantic, immeasurably proud of her Cavalier blood, and passionate in her love for her young husband. For its sake she braved her father's displeasure, endured his reproaches, listened with loyalty unshaken to his warning predictions, and went from his house without his blessing […]

[3] The morning after the marriage there was a sad surprise for her. Her husband put aside her proffered caresses, and said: "Sit down. I have something to say to you. I loved you. That was before I asked your father to give you to me. His refusal is not my grievance—I could have endured that. But the things he said of me to you—that is a different matter. There—you needn't speak; I know quite well what they were; I got them from authentic sources. Among other things he said that my character was written in my face; that I was treacherous, a dissembler, a coward, and a brute without sense of pity or compassion. Any other man in my place would have gone to his house and shot him down like a dog. I wanted to do it, and was minded to do it, but a better thought came to me: to put him to shame; to break his heart; to kill him by inches. How to do it? Through my treatment of you, his idol! I would marry you; and then—Have patience. You will see."

Teaching Notes: Analyzing the Impact of an Author's Choices

The goal of RL.11-12.3 is for students to be able to analyze the impact of an author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama, such as where a story is set, how the action is ordered, and how the characters are introduced and developed. The following information contains ideas that teachers can incorporate into their classroom as well as additional resources to peruse and integrate into instruction as appropriate.

Activities

1. Assign students a grade-appropriate excerpt from a literary text. Then direct students to focus on one element of the text (setting, order of events, etc.) and ask them to identify all the author's choices for that specific story element. Have students analyze the purpose and effect of the choices they find by asking them probing questions, such as the following:

    - What is the historical context for the setting of the story?

    - At which point might readers be confused about details of the plot?

    - Are there any secrets about the characters that the author holds back on purpose and then later reveals?

2. Ask each student to work with a partner. Direct the students to reread the excerpt from "A Double Barrelled Detective Story" by Mark Twain. Once they have finished, ask the groups to discuss the choices the author made about story elements like setting, the order of events, the development of characters, and the use of specific words and phrases. Encourage the students to think about how the story would be different if any of these elements were changed. For example, what if the story did not take place in Virginia in 1880? Or how would the story be different if it began with the third paragraph?

Writing Prompts

1. Assign students a grade-appropriate excerpt from a literary text. Then direct them to identify one element of the text that the author made a conscious decision about. Ask them to write a paragraph explaining the choice the author made and the effect it has on the overall text. For example, if a student chooses to focus on the last line of a paragraph, he or she might explain that the particular line was chosen to build a sense of suspense in the reader.

2. Ask students to bring in a long form literary work, such as a novel or play. Direct them to choose a favorite portion (chapter or scene) to analyze in depth. Then have students write a one-sentence summary for each paragraph or section. Ask them to specify the setting, characters, important events, and tone when appropriate. By outlining the text, students will be better able to identify and explain how an author's specific choices impact the meaning and effectiveness of a text.