

Grades 9–10 Playlist: Analyzing World Literature

Aligns with *CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.6*:

- 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.

Welcome

For thousands of years, people all over the world have been passing down stories from one generation to the next. These stories have lasted even though the cultures have changed. Therefore, the stories often provide a glimpse into what life was like in the past, even though the specific characters and situations are fictional. Understanding the cultural and historical context of a work of literature helps clarify the **point of view** of specific characters.

Literature from cultures outside of the United States contains examples of beliefs, customs, and ideas that are unfamiliar. However, understanding these differences—as well as finding what is similar—helps enrich the reader’s understanding of the story.

Caution

Some cultures have values or practices that are opposite of those in the United States and that some would consider to be wrong. While it is okay to disagree with a value or practice in another culture, it is important to understand the whole context of that value or practice.

Objectives

In this playlist students will learn and practice how to:

- use cultural context to explain why a character acts a certain way.
- identify different cultural elements in a text and research them to gain a better understanding of the text.

Review

Key Terms

- **point of view**: the type of narrator in a story (e.g., first-person or third-person), or the perspective that a certain character in the story has

Watch!

This video describes different points of view and gives examples from literature:

- <https://www.opened.com/video/pov-point-of-view/1536048>



The Setting of *The Tale of Genji*

The Tale of Genji takes place in Japan during the Heian period, which lasted from 794–1185 A.D. During this time, Japan’s capital was modern-day Kyoto, which is southwest of Tokyo, Japan. The elite members of society centered their lives around the emperor and their own leisure. They had very strict ideas about rank and heritage, and had refined tastes for clothing, calligraphy, music, and poetry. In fact, noble men fell in love with noble ladies not based on their looks, but based on the poetry the ladies would write. This is largely because most ladies stayed indoors or remained hidden behind screens. Because of this, men would only see the sleeves of their robes and read their poetry before falling in love with them.

Summary of *The Tale of Genji*

The Tale of Genji is the story of Genji, the son of the emperor and one of his mistresses. As a young man, Genji has affairs with many women around Heian-kyo (the capital city, modern-day Kyoto). He is soon in an arranged marriage, but is in love with another woman named Murasaki.

The emperor dies and Genji’s affairs cause major problems. He is exiled to Suma for several years. When he returns to Heian-kyo, he regains his position in the court. He acquires his own mansion where he lives with Murasaki and other ladies. As time goes by, Genji gains more influence at court while he tries to support his children’s and grandchildren’s positions there.

Major Characters in *The Tale of Genji*

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Genji (<i>ghen-jee</i>): son of a court lady of low rank and the emperor; the main character • Yûgao (<i>yoo-gah-oo</i>): a low-ranking woman who Genji has an affair with while he is visiting his wet nurse | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Koremitsu (<i>ko-reh-mee-tsoo</i>): Genji’s foster brother; helps Genji court Yûgao and other women throughout the novel |
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Exploring the Standard

Point of view usually refers to what type of narrator the story uses. However, point of view also involves the perspectives of the characters in the story. These perspectives tend to reflect the culture and time period of the characters. When reading literature from another culture, identify which plot events or character reactions reflect that culture. Think about how particular cultural beliefs affect the points of view of the characters.

Hint!

If something in a work of literature from another culture does not make sense, it might be a belief or practice specific to that culture. Try to find outside resources about the belief or practice, or even about the work of literature itself. These will help you better understand the story.

Read!

Read this online encyclopedia entry to learn more about the Heian Period in Japan:

- http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Heian_Period



Teacher Notes: Analyzing World Literature

The goal of RL.9-10.6 is for students to understand and be able to explain the point of view or cultural experience of a story from outside of the United States. The following information contains ideas that teachers can incorporate into their classroom to practice this standard.

“Applying the Standard” Sample Response

The painting helps clarify the cultural point of view of the story by showing what the front of Yûgao’s house looks like. A reader from the United States may have difficulty imagining the fence containing the evening glories and the blinds in front of the house because today’s homes in the United States are not laid out this way. The painting also emphasizes that Yûgao is attractive because of the bright pattern on her sleeves. It shows her giving the flowers to the attendant to then give to Genji. This helps readers see how people courted each other during the Heian Period.

Activities

1. Ask students to discuss another book that they have read from outside of the United States. (For example, the *Harry Potter* series was written by a British author.) Have each student share the title, author, and plot of the book and explain something he or she learned about that culture.
2. Divide students into groups and ask each group to reimagine a scene from *The Tale of Genji* as if it took place today in American culture or another culture that they are familiar with. They can write their scene, act it out, or draw it. Have each group share their scene with the class and explain how the cultural point of view changed in their new version. Then have them explain what stayed the same.

Writing Prompts

1. Ask students to choose another chapter of *The Tale of Genji* and write about at least two cultural values or practices that are part of the characters’ points of view. If necessary, have students conduct research to find out how these values or practices fit into the culture of Japan during the Heian period.
2. Find an excerpt of a novel or short story that uses dialect to reflect the culture of the characters. Ask students to write an essay analyzing how the author uses dialect to help readers better understand the characters and setting in the story.

Additional Resources

- Read the full text of *The Tale of Genji* at this website:
<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/19264/19264-h/19264-h.htm>
- This video explains more about Japan in the Heian Period:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZnZEoOJ-cxE>
- This website gives more details about *The Tale of Genji*:
<http://www.taleofgenji.org/>

