

Comparing Literature

Langston Terrace and Home

BQ BIG Question

As you read these paired selections, ask yourself, what does *home* mean to the narrators of "Langston Terrace" and "Home"?

Literary Element Tone

Tone is the attitude of the author or narrator toward the subject, ideas, theme, or characters of a literary work. The tone of a literary work may be serious, humorous, somber, or even hopeful. The author's sentence construction and choice of words, details, and images help create the tone. As you read the essay and short story, pay attention to how tone helps support the theme, or main message, of each selection.

Reading Skill Compare and Contrast

Comparisons are similarities between items, while contrasts are differences. You might compare and contrast after-school activities, for example, to choose one that you like and that fits into your schedule.

Comparing and contrasting the tone of two literary selections can help you understand each selection's theme. On the following pages, you'll compare and contrast the tone of "Langston Terrace" and "Home." Use a chart like the one below to note similarities and differences between the two selections. As you read, write details from each selection that help you identify the tone. Explain how the tone of each selection supports its theme.

	Tone	Details Revealing Tone	How Details Support Theme
"Langston Terrace"			
"Home"			

Learning Objectives

For pages 570–579

In studying these texts, you will focus on the following objectives:

Literary Study: Analyzing tone.

Reading: Comparing and contrasting tone and theme.

Meet the Authors



Eloise Greenfield and Lessie Jones Little

Lessie Jones Little was born in 1906 and died in 1986. Her daughter, Eloise Greenfield, was born in 1929.



Gwendolyn Brooks

Gwendolyn Brooks was born in 1917 and died in 2000.



Literature Online

Author Search For more about Eloise Greenfield, Lessie Jones Little, and Gwendolyn Brooks, go to glencoe.com and enter QuickPass code GL29763u4.



Eloise Greenfield & Lessie Jones Little

I fell in love with Langston Terrace the very first time I saw it. Our family had been living in two rooms of a three-story house when Mama and Daddy saw the newspaper article telling of the plans to build it. It was going to be a low-rent housing project¹ in northeast Washington, and it would be named in honor of John Mercer Langston, the famous black lawyer, educator, and congressman.

¹ A public **housing project** is homes built by the government for people who might not otherwise be able to afford to rent or buy homes.

Children at Play, 1947. Jacob Lawrence. Tempera on hardboard, 20 x 24 in. Georgia Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA. ©ARS, NY.

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In what way does the first sentence help set the tone of the essay? Add your thoughts to the chart.



So many people needed housing and wanted to live there, many more than there would be room for. They were all filling out

applications,² hoping to be one of the 274 families chosen. My parents filled out one, too.

I didn't want to move. I knew our house was crowded—there were eleven of us, six adults and five children—but I didn't want to leave my friends, and I didn't want to go to a strange place and be the new person in a neighborhood and a school where most of the other children already knew each other. I was eight years old, and I had been to three schools. We had moved five times since we'd been in Washington, each time trying to get more space and a better place to live. But rent was high so we'd always lived in a house with relatives and friends, and shared the rent.

One of the people in our big household was Lillie, Daddy's cousin and Mama's best friend. She and her husband also applied for a place in the new project, and during the months that it was being built, Lillie and Mama would sometimes walk fifteen blocks just to stand and watch the workmen digging holes and laying bricks. They'd just stand there watching and wishing. And at home, that was all they could talk about. "When we get our new place . . ." "If we get our new place . . ."

Lillie got her good news first. I can still see her and Mama standing at the bottom of the hall steps, hugging and laughing and crying, happy for Lillie, then sitting on the steps, worrying and wishing again for Mama.

Finally, one evening, a woman came to the house with our good news, and Mama and Daddy went over and picked out the house they wanted. We moved on my ninth birthday. Wilbur, Gerald, and I went to school that morning from one house, and when Daddy came to pick us up, he took us home to another one. All the furniture had been moved while we were in school.

² **Applications** are forms used to make requests. People fill out applications for jobs, colleges, and apartment and house rentals.

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In what ways do Lillie and Mama's conversation and other details in this paragraph add to the tone of the essay?

Langston Terrace was a lovely birthday present. It was built on a hill, a group of tan brick houses and apartments with a playground as its center. The red mud surrounding the concrete walks had not yet been covered with black soil and grass seed, and the holes that would soon be homes for young trees were filled with rainwater. But it still looked beautiful to me.

We had a whole house all to ourselves. Upstairs and downstairs. Two bedrooms, and the living room would be my bedroom at night. Best of all, I wasn't the only new person. Everybody was new to this new little community, and by the time school opened in the fall, we had gotten used to each other and had made friends with other children in the neighborhood, too.

I guess most of the parents thought of the new place as an in-between place. They were glad to be there, but their dream was to save enough money to pay for a house that would be their own. Saving was hard, though, and slow, because each time somebody in a family got a raise on the job, it had to be reported to the manager of the project so that the rent could be raised, too. Most people stayed years longer than they had planned to, but they didn't let that stop them from enjoying life.

They formed a resident council to look into any neighborhood problems that might come up. They started a choral group and presented music and poetry programs on Sunday evenings in the social room or on the playground. On weekends, they played horseshoes and softball and other games. They had a reading club that met once a week at the Langston branch of the public library, after it opened in the basement of one of the apartment buildings.

The library was very close to my house. I could leave by my back door and be there in two minutes. The playground was right in front of my house, and after my sister Vedic was born and we moved a few doors down to a three-bedroom house, I could just look out of my bedroom window to see if any of my friends were out playing.

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How do the details in this paragraph affect the tone of the essay?

There were so many games to play and things to do. We played hide-and-seek at the lamppost, paddle tennis and shuffleboard, dodge ball and jacks. We danced in fireplug showers, jumped rope to rhymes, played "Bouncy, Bouncy, Bally," swinging one leg over a bouncing ball, played baseball on a nearby field, had parties in the social room and bus trips to the beach. In the playroom, we played Ping-Pong and pool, learned to sew and embroider and crochet.

For us, Langston Terrace wasn't an in-between place. It was a growing place, a good growing-up place. Neighbors who cared, family and friends, and a lot of fun. Life was good. Not perfect, but good. We knew about problems, heard about them, saw them, lived through some hard ones ourselves, but our community wrapped itself around us, put itself between us and the hard knocks, to cushion the blows.

It's been many years since I moved away, but every once in a long while I go back, just to look at things and remember. The large stone animals that decorated the playground are still there. A walrus, a hippo, a frog, and two horses. They've started to crack now, but I remember when they first came to live with us. They were friends, to climb on or to lean against, or to gather around in the evening. You could sit on the frog's head and look way out over the city at the tall trees and rooftops.

Nowadays, whenever I run into old friends, mostly at a funeral, or maybe a wedding, after we've talked about how we've been and what we've been doing, and how old our children are, we always end up talking about our childhood in our old neighborhood. And somebody will say, "One of these days we ought to have a Langston reunion."³ That's what we always called it, just "Langston," without the "Terrace." I guess because it sounded more homey. And that's what Langston was. It was home.

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How do the sentence constructions and other details in this paragraph affect the tone? How do they help express the essay's theme?

³ A *reunion* is a gathering of people who have been apart for a while.



Children Dancing, 1948. Robert Gwathmey. Oil on canvas, 32 x 40 in.
The Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, OH.

What had been wanted was this always,
this always to last, the talking softly on
this porch, with the snake plant in the jardiniere
in the southwest corner, and the obstinate slip¹
from Aunt Eppie's magnificent Michigan fern
at the left side of the friendly door. Mama,

¹ A *jardiniere* (jărd'ən ěr') is a decorative pot or plant stand.
Something that is *obstinate* is stubborn. A *slip* is a small part of a
plant that is used to grow a new plant.



Maud Martha and Helen rocked slowly in their rocking chairs, and looked at the late afternoon light on the lawn, and at the emphatic² iron of the fence and at the poplar tree. These things might soon be theirs no longer. Those shafts and pools of light, the tree, the graceful iron, might soon be viewed possessively by different eyes.

Papa was to have gone that noon, during his lunch hour, to the office of the Home Owners' Loan. If he had not succeeded in getting another extension, they would be leaving this house in which they had lived for more than fourteen years. There was little hope. The Home Owners' Loan was hard. They sat, making their plans.

"We'll be moving into a nice flat³ somewhere," said Mama. "Somewhere on South Park, or Michigan, or in Washington Park Court." Those flats, as the girls and Mama knew well, were burdens on wages twice the size of Papa's. This was not mentioned now.

"They're much prettier than this old house," said Helen. "I have friends I'd just as soon not bring here. And I have other friends that wouldn't come down this far for anything, unless they were in a taxi."

Yesterday, Maud Martha would have attacked her. Tomorrow she might. Today she said nothing. She merely gazed at a little hopping robin in the tree, her tree, and tried to keep the fronts of her eyes dry.

"Well, I do know," said Mama, turning her hands over and over, "that I've been getting tired and tired of doing that firing. From October to April, there's firing to be done."

"But lately we've been helping, Harry and I," said Maud Martha. "And sometimes in March and April and in October, and even in November, we could build a little fire in the fireplace. Sometimes the weather was just right for that."

² *Emphatic* means "strongly expressive" or "forceful."

³ *Flat* is another word for apartment.

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What is the tone of the first paragraph? Which elements help create the tone?

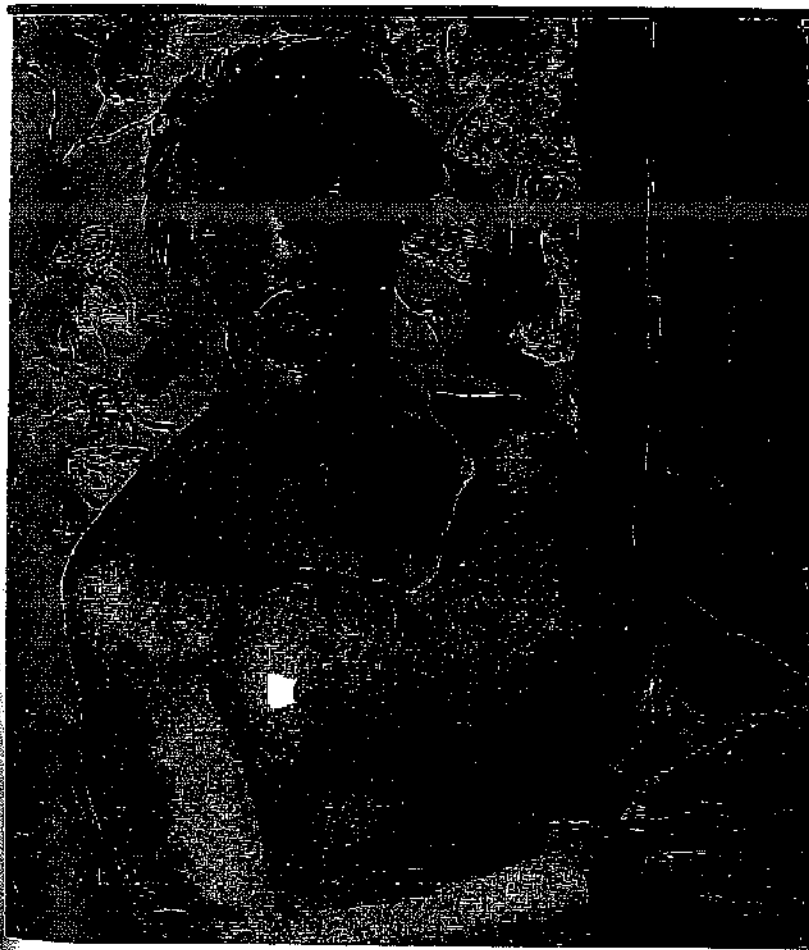
She knew, from the way they looked at her, that this had been a mistake. They did not want to cry.

But she felt that the little line of white, somewhat ridged with smoked purple, and all that cream-shot saffron,⁴ would never drift across any western sky except that in back of this house. The rain would drum with as sweet a dullness nowhere but here. The birds on South Park were mechanical birds, no better than the poor caught canaries in those "rich" women's sun parlors.

"It's just going to kill Papa!" burst out Maud Martha. "He loves this house! He lives for this house!"

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What tone do the descriptions in this paragraph create?



Woman Holding Jug,
1932-1933, James A. Porter.
Oil on canvas. Carl Van
Vechten Gallery of Fine Art,
Fisk University, Nashville, TN.

View the Art Which
character from the story
does the woman in this
painting remind you of?

The orange-yellow color (*saffron*) is streaked or mixed (*shot*) with a cream color.

"He lives for us," said Helen. "It's us he loves. He wouldn't want the house, except for us."

"And he'll have us," added Mama, "wherever."

"You know," Helen sighed, "if you want to know the truth, this is a relief. If this hadn't come up, we would have gone on, just dragged on, hanging out here forever."

"It might," allowed Mama, "be an act of God. God may just have reached down, and picked up the reins."

"Yes," Maud Martha cracked in, "that's what you always say—that God knows best."

Her mother looked at her quickly, decided the statement was not suspect, looked away.

Helen saw Papa coming. "There's Papa," said Helen.

They could not tell a thing from the way Papa was walking. It was that same dear little staccato⁵ walk, one shoulder down, then the other, then repeat, and repeat. They watched his progress. He passed the Kennedys', he passed the vacant lot, he passed Mrs. Blakemore's. They wanted to hurl themselves over the fence, into the street, and shake the truth out of his collar. He opened his gate—the gate—and still his stride⁶ and face told them nothing.


"Hello," he said.

Mama got up and followed him through the front door. The girls knew better than to go in too.

Presently Mama's head emerged. Her eyes were lamps turned on.

"It's all right," she exclaimed. "He got it. It's all over. Everything is all right."

The door slammed shut. Mama's footsteps hurried away.

"I think," said Helen, rocking rapidly, "I think I'll give a party. I haven't given a party since I was eleven. I'd like some of my friends to just casually see that we're homeowners." 

⁵ *Staccato* means "made of short, sharp sounds or movements."

⁶ Papa's *stride* is his way of walking.

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How does the tone help reveal the story's theme?

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BQ BIG Question

Now use the unit Big Question to compare and contrast “Langston Terrace” and “Home.” With a group of classmates, discuss questions such as

- What do you think *home* means to the narrator in the essay “Langston Terrace”?
- What do you think *home* means to the characters in the short story “Home”?
- How do the characters’ experiences influence your ideas about what a home is?

Literary Element Tone

Use the details that you wrote in your chart to think about the tones of “Langston Terrace” and “Home.” With a partner, answer the following questions.

1. In what ways are the tones of “Langston Terrace” and “Home” different? Discuss specific details that contribute to the differences.
2. In what ways are the tones of both selections similar? Consider the tone the authors create when they describe the different homes.

Write to Compare

In one or two paragraphs, explain how the tone of “Langston Terrace” and the tone of “Home” support the theme of each selection. You might focus on these ideas as you write.

- Tell how the narrator in “Langston Terrace” expresses feelings about the housing project as a whole, not just the family’s house.
- Include details about how the characters in “Home” express their thoughts about the house. Explain why they talk about the problems with the house.
- Explain how the characters’ situation in each selection affects the tone.
- Explain how the similarities and differences in tone help you understand what the authors mean by the word *home*.



Writing Tip

Details Cite details from the selections to support the statements you make about tone. Choose vivid details so that your readers will easily recall them.



Literature Online

Selection Resources

For Selection Quizzes, eFlashcards, and Reading-Writing Connection activities, go to glencoe.com and enter QuickPass code GL29763u4.