

Comparing Literature

Superman and Me and My First Memory (of Librarians)

BQ BIG Question

As you read these paired selections, ask yourself, what do the narrator in "Superman and Me" and the speaker in "My First Memory (of Librarians)" have in common? What gives their lives joy and meaning?

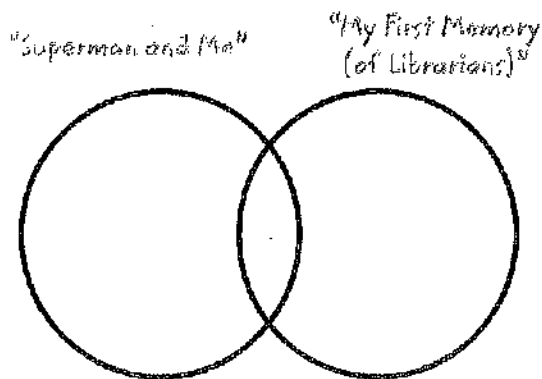
Literary Element Setting

You've learned that **setting** is the time and place in which the events of a literary work take place. The setting often helps create the mood, or atmosphere, of a story. As you read the essay and the poem, notice details that describe when and where. Also look for ways in which the setting helps reveal the theme, or overall message, of each selection.

Read **Compare and Contrast**

When you compare, you look for similarities. When you contrast, you look for differences. Comparing and contrasting the settings of two selections can help you understand how setting gives meaning to a literary work.

On the following pages, you'll compare and contrast the settings of "Superman and Me" and "My First Memory (of Librarians)." Use a diagram like the one below to help compare and contrast the settings of the two selections. Record differences in the settings in the outer portions of each circle. Record how the settings are similar in the overlapping portion of the circles. Consider how the settings help reveal a similar theme across both selections.



Learning Objectives

For pages 439–447

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

Literary Study: Analyzing setting.

Reading: Comparing and contrasting setting and theme.

Meet the Authors



Sherman Alexie

Sherman Alexie grew up in the state of Washington. He was born in 1966.



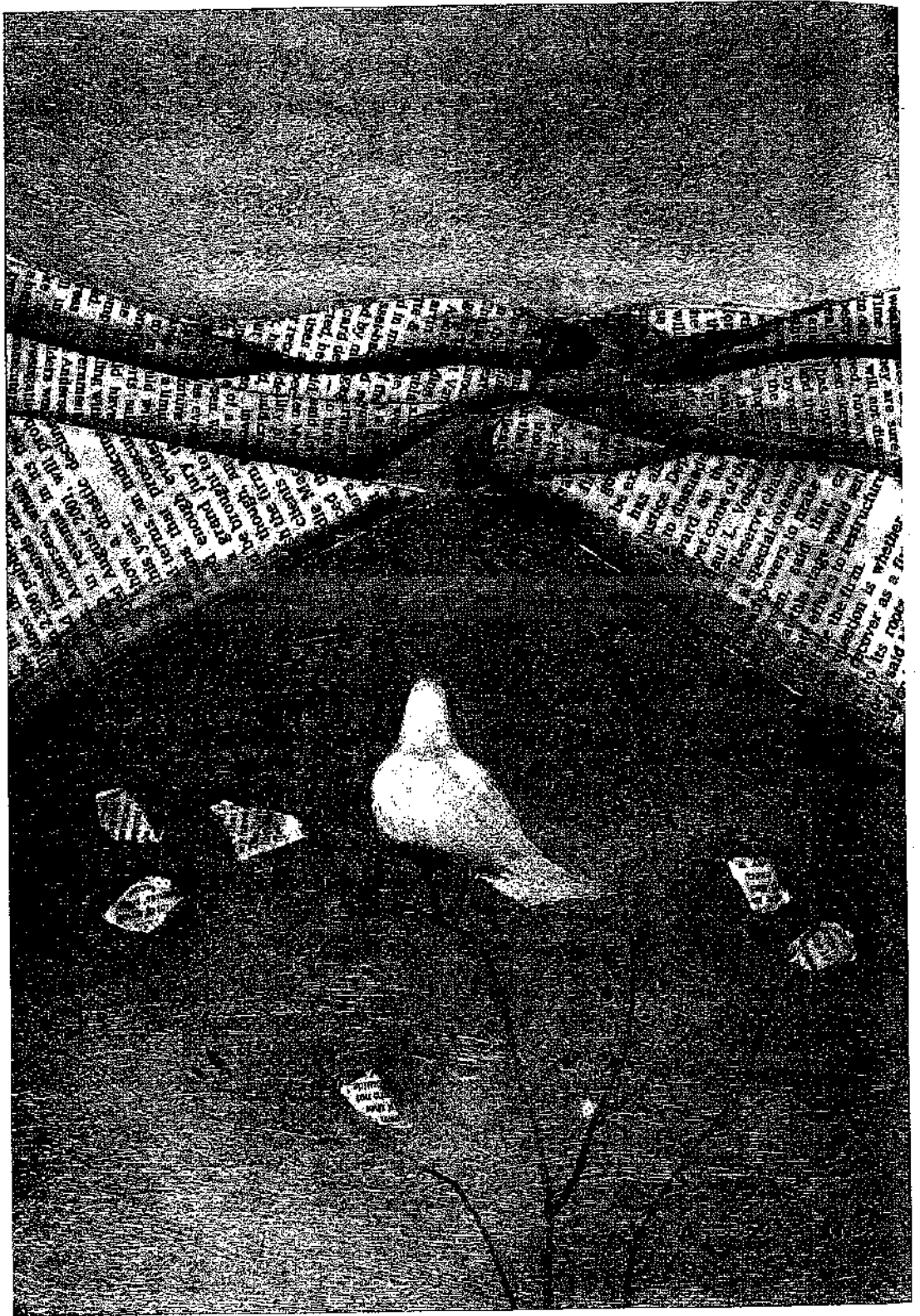
Nikki Giovanni

Nikki Giovanni is a poet, a professor, and a political activist. She was born in 1943.



Online

Author Search For more about Sherman Alexie and Nikki Giovanni, go to glencoe.com and enter QuickPass code GL29763u3.



Dove and Newspaper Hills. Kazu Nitta.

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Sherman Alexie

I learned to read with a *Superman* comic book. Simple enough, I suppose. I cannot recall which particular *Superman* comic book I read, nor can I remember which villain he fought in that issue. I cannot remember the plot, nor the means by which I obtained the comic book. What I can remember is this: I was three years old, a Spokane Indian boy living with his family on the Spokane Indian Reservation in eastern Washington state. We were poor by most standards, but one of my parents usually managed to find some minimum-wage job or another, which made us middle class by reservation standards. I had a brother and three sisters. We lived on a combination of irregular paychecks, hope, fear, and government-surplus food.

My father, who is one of the few Indians who went to Catholic school on purpose, was an avid¹ reader of westerns, spy thrillers, murder mysteries, gangster epics, basketball-player biographies, and anything else he could find. He bought his books by the pound at Dutch's Pawn Shop, Goodwill, Salvation Army, and Value Village. When he had extra money, he bought new novels at supermarkets, convenience stores, and hospital gift shops. Our house was filled with books. They were stacked in crazy piles in the bathroom, bedrooms, and living room. In a fit of unemployment-inspired creative energy, my father built a set of

Comparing Literatures

Describe the setting of the narrator's childhood.

¹ If you are an *avid* reader, you have a great enthusiasm for reading.

bookshelves and soon filled them with a random assortment of books about the Kennedy assassination, Watergate, the Vietnam War, and the entire twenty-three-book series of the Apache westerns.² My father loved books, and since I loved my father with an aching devotion, I decided to love books as well.

I can remember picking up my father's books before I could read. The words themselves were mostly foreign, but I still remember the exact moment when I first understood, with a sudden clarity, the purpose of a paragraph. I didn't have the vocabulary to say "paragraph," but I realized that a paragraph was a fence that held words. The words inside a paragraph worked together for a common purpose. They had some specific reason for being inside the same fence. This knowledge delighted me. I began to think of everything in terms of paragraphs. Our reservation was a small paragraph within the United States. My family's house was a paragraph, distinct from the other paragraphs of the LeBrets to the north, the Fords to our south, and the Tribal School to the west. Inside our house, each family member existed as a separate paragraph, but still had genetics and common experiences to link us. Now, using this logic, I can see my changed family as an essay of seven paragraphs: mother, father, older brother, the deceased³ sister, my younger twin sisters, and our adopted little brother.

At the same time I was seeing the world in paragraphs, I also picked up that *Superman* comic book. Each panel, complete with picture, dialogue, and narrative, was a three-dimensional paragraph. In one panel, Superman breaks through a door. His suit is red,

2 The **Kennedy assassination** refers to the death of U.S. President John F. Kennedy in 1963. During the administration of U.S. President Richard Nixon, a series of scandals called **Watergate** took place. During the **Vietnam War** (1954–1975), the United States helped South Vietnam fight North Vietnam. The **Apache** are a group of Native Americans.

3 **Deceased** is another word for *dead*.

Compare the two paragraphs. In what way does reading affect the narrator's view of his setting?

blue, and yellow. The brown door shatters into many pieces. I look at the narrative above the picture. I cannot read the words, but I assume it tells me that Superman is breaking down the door. Aloud, I pretend to read the words and say "Superman is breaking down the door." Words, dialogue, also float out of Superman's mouth. Because he is breaking down the door, I assume he says, "I am breaking down the door." Once again, I pretend to read the words and say aloud, "I am breaking down the door." In this way, I learned to read.

This might be an interesting story all by itself. A little Indian boy teaches himself to read at an early age and advances quickly. He reads *Grapes of Wrath* in kindergarten when other children are struggling through Dick and Jane. If he'd been anything but an Indian boy living on the reservation, he might have been called a prodigy.⁴ But he is an Indian boy living on the reservation, and is simply an oddity. He grows into a man who often speaks of his childhood in the third-person, as if it will somehow dull the pain and make him sound more modest about his talents.

A smart Indian is a dangerous person, widely feared and ridiculed by Indians and non-Indians alike. I fought with my classmates on a daily basis. They wanted me to stay quiet when the non-Indian teacher asked for answers, for volunteers, for help. We were Indian children who were expected to be stupid. Most lived up to those expectations inside the classroom, but subverted⁵ them on the outside. They struggled with basic reading in school, but could remember how to sing a few dozen powwow songs. They were mono-syllabic in front of their non-Indian teachers, but could tell complicated stories and jokes at the dinner table. They submissively ducked their heads when confronted⁶ by a

4 A *prodigy* is a young person with exceptional talent.

5 If you *subverted* an idea, you went against it.

6 If you *confronted* someone, you met him or her face-to-face.

~~Compare this to the text~~ Why does the narrator feel like an outsider in his setting?

The narrator is reading the narrator's view of

non-Indian adult, but would slug it out with the Indian bully who was ten years older. As Indian children, we were expected to fail in the non-Indian world. Those who failed were ceremonially accepted by other Indians and appropriately pitied by non-Indians.

I refused to fail. I was smart. I was arrogant.⁷ I was lucky. I read books late into the night, until I could barely keep my eyes open. I read books at recess, then during lunch, and in the few minutes left after I had finished my classroom assignments. I read books in the car when my family traveled to powwows or basketball games. In shopping malls, I ran to the bookstores and read bits and pieces of as many books as I could. I read the books my father brought home from the pawnshops and secondhand stores. I read the books I borrowed from the library. I read the backs of cereal boxes. I read the newspaper. I read the bulletins posted on the walls of the school, the clinic, the tribal offices, the post office. I read junk mail. I read auto-repair manuals. I read magazines. I read anything that had words and paragraphs. I read with equal parts joy and desperation. I loved those books, but I also knew that love had only one purpose. I was trying to save my life.

Despite all the books I read, I am still surprised I became a writer. I was going to be a pediatrician.⁸ These days, I write novels, short stories, and poems. I visit schools and teach creative writing to Indian kids. In all my years in the reservation school system, I was never taught how to write poetry, short stories, or novels. I was certainly never taught that Indians wrote poetry, short stories, and novels. Writing was something beyond Indians. I cannot recall a single time that a guest teacher visited the reservation. There must have been visiting teachers. Who were they? Where are they now? Do they

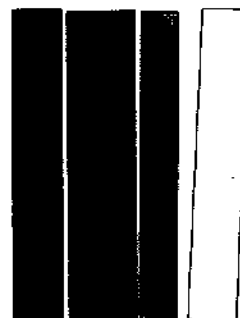
Comparing Literature In
what way can books save
someone's life?

7 An *arrogant* person is proud of himself or herself or feels that he or she is better than others.

8 A *pediatrician* is a doctor who specializes in the care of children.

exist? I visit the schools as often as possible. The Indian kids crowd the classroom. Many are writing their own poems, short stories, and novels. They have read my books. They have read many other books. They look at me with bright eyes and arrogant wonder. They are trying to save their lives. Then there are the sullen and already defeated Indian kids who sit in the back rows and ignore me with theatrical precision. The pages of their notebooks are empty. They carry neither pencil nor pen. They stare out the window. They refuse and resist. "Books," I say to them. "Books," I say. I throw my weight against their locked doors. The door holds. I am smart. I am arrogant. I am lucky. I am trying to save our lives. ~~is~~

Comparing Literature How has the school setting changed since the narrator was a child? How has it stayed the same?



...e in
books save



My First Memory (of Librarians)

Nikki Giovanni

This is my first memory:

A big room with heavy wooden tables that sat on
a creaky wood floor

A line of green shades—bankers' lights—down
the center

Heavy oak chairs that were too low or maybe I was
simply too short

5 For me to sit in and read
So my first book was always big

In the foyer^o up four steps a semi-circle desk
presided

To the left side the card catalogue

On the right newspapers draped over what
looked like a quilt rack

10 Magazines face out from the wall

The welcoming smile of my librarian

The anticipation in my heart

All those books—another world—just waiting

At my fingertips.

7 A *foyer* is a lobby or an entrance hall.

Comparing Literature What is the mood of the poem? In what ways do details in the setting affect the mood of the poem?

Comparing Literature

BQ > BIG Question

Now use the unit Big Question to compare and contrast "Superman and Me" and "My First Memory (of Librarians)." With a group of classmates, discuss questions such as

- What do the narrator and the speaker both value in their lives? Why?
- How do the activities that they enjoy improve the quality of their lives?

Support each answer with evidence from the readings.

Literary Element Setting

Use the details you wrote in your diagram to think about the settings in "Superman and Me" and "My First Memory (of Librarians)." With a partner, answer the following questions.

1. In what ways are the settings different in "Superman and Me" and "My First Memory (of Librarians)"? Discuss specific details, feelings, and any other ways the two settings differ.
2. In what ways are the settings in both selections similar? For example, you might think about how the narrator and the speaker feel in the settings, what opportunities the settings offer, or other important ways you think that the settings are alike.

W Writing Tip

In one or two paragraphs, explain how the settings contribute to the same general theme in "Superman and Me" and "My First Memory (of Librarians)." You might focus on these ideas as you write.

- Tell how the places described in the selections affect the narrator's and the speaker's views about themselves and their lives.
- Include details about the appearance of people, places, and things that influence the quality of the narrator's and the speaker's lives.
- Explain how similarities and differences in the setting, mood, and structure of each selection affect your responses to the two selections.

Writing Tip

Transitional Words and Phrases As you write, use transitional words and phrases such as *then*, *as a result*, *therefore*, and *however* to connect the ideas in your paragraphs.



Go Online

Selection Resources

For Selection Quizzes, eFlashcards, and Reading-Writing Connection activities, go to glencoe.com and enter QuickPass code GL29763u3.

