



The Shipping News— Characterization of the Protagonist

Grades 9 – 10

ABOUT THIS LESSON

This lesson focuses on the introductory paragraphs of Annie Proulx’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Shipping News*. The passage is an example of a richly-layered text that will allow students to grapple with the effect of figurative language and connotative diction. The purpose of the lesson is to lead students to an understanding of how these devices of language reveal the complex character of the protagonist.

TEXT COMPLEXITY

Passages for the National Math and Science Initiative (NMSI) English lessons are selected to challenge students, while lessons and activities make texts accessible. Guided practice with challenging texts allows students to gain the proficiency necessary to read independently at or above grade level. Qualitative and quantitative measures of *The Shipping News* make it appropriately complex for nine/ten grade level bands.

COGNITIVE RIGOR

English lessons for NMSI are designed to guide students through a continuum of increasingly complex thinking skills, including those outlined in taxonomies such as the Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy and Webb’s Depth of Knowledge Levels. The activities in this lesson move students from making basic inferences (DOK Level 2) to analyzing textual information and interpreting the author’s craft as it relates to characterization (DOK Level 3). In a similar manner, students move between various

OBJECTIVES

Students will

- provide textual evidence to support inferences about the character traits of the protagonist.
- analyze diction and figurative language.
- write a thesis statement and supporting textual evidence to address the questions of a writing prompt.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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levels of Bloom’s Revised Taxonomy (Understand through Evaluate).

This lesson is included in Module 2: *Understanding Text Complexity*.

CONNECTIONS TO COMMON CORE STANDARDS FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

The activities in this lesson allow teachers to address the following Common Core Standards.

Explicitly addressed in this lesson

RL.9-10.1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

RL.9-10.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).

W.9-10.9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Implicitly addressed in this lesson

RL.9-10.3: Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

L.9-10.2: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.

W.9-10.10: Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.

CONNECTIONS TO AP*

A student’s ability to make inferences about and to analyze characterization is a skill that indicates his or her ability to read closely, independently, and proficiently, which is a key college readiness skill. Character analysis is also a task required of students in both the free response and multiple choice sections of AP English Literature exams. Regular practice in the early grades helps students develop these skills.

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MATERIALS AND RESOURCES

- copies of Student Activity
- copies of the “Characters and Characterization” Student Resource

ASSESSMENTS

The following kinds of formative assessments are embedded in this lesson:

- guided questions
- graphic organizers
- writing assignment

TEACHING SUGGESTIONS**Activity One: Reading and Responding to the Text**

Have students read and respond to the text before any discussion takes place. Then, have a short discussion with students about their reactions to the text. You might begin the discussion with questions such as:

- How might you feel about this character if he were in your class?
- What do you think the character might do well?
- What do you think the character might not do well?

Activity Two: Reading and Understanding the Prompt

Read the prompt aloud and have students discuss the tasks of the prompt. Lead them to an understanding of both the task of identifying the abstract (the complex characterization) and the task of analyzing the concrete (the use of literary elements).

Activity Three: Guided Annotation

This activity takes a “peeling back the layers” approach to analyzing Proulx’s use of diction, figurative language, and details. If your students are more advanced or if you think they are ready for a challenge, you can skip this activity and move directly to Activity Four. If you complete Activity Three in class, you may want students to complete the entire activity, or you might divide the room into three groups and have each group tackle the questions on one literary element. Either way, discuss the students’ conclusions about how Proulx’s use of diction, figurative language, and details all work together to create a complex character.

Note: Questions 6, 7, and 8 focus on the motivation behind Quoyle’s actions. Students need to consider how the choices Quoyle makes are a result of the way he has been treated. The questions in this

activity provide an entry point into CCSS RL.9-10.3. In order to explicitly address this standard, you will need to use multiple passages from *The Shipping News* so students can follow the character’s development over the course of a text.

Activity Four: Making Inferences about Character Traits

Read the instructions for Activity Four and discuss the sample annotations with students. Explain to students that, from the details in the text, the writer of the lesson has inferred that Quoyle is unhappy. You may wish to use the initial paragraphs to model additional annotations for students under a document camera or allow students to work in groups to make inferences supported with textual evidence before having them work through the remainder of the passage independently. Make sure students understand that their inferences must be connected to the textual evidence.

For Question 2, depending on the abilities of your students, you may want to give students the categories for the graphic organizer (such as physical appearance, relationships, self-image, etc.) or work through finding the patterns together as a whole class. The statement that students write in question 3 should lead them to an understanding of how the different elements of Quoyle’s character impact each other. His physical appearance has a profound effect on his relationships with his family and other students, as well as his self-image.

The thesis statement and supporting textual evidence can be used as a starting point for a characterization essay. The Student Activity for this lesson does not require students to write an entire essay, but students will be prepared to write the essay on characterization after completing the activities.

Note: The NMSI English lesson “Writing Effective Thesis Statements and Topic Sentences” is available on the NMSI website for additional practice writing effective thesis sentences.

Suggestions for additional scaffolding

To help students visualize the physical description of Quoye, show pictures of a crenshaw melon. You might demonstrate for students the gesture of “kissed fingertips.” Students (or one student) with artistic ability could sketch Quoye’s physical appearance or make a caricature. However, the point of the lesson is to lead students to an understanding of how his abnormal appearance motivates his actions and affects his relationships with others.

ANSWERS**Activity One: Reading and Responding to the Text**

Responses to the text and to the discussion will vary.

Activity Two: Reading and Understanding the Prompt

1. complex character (Students must make assertions about Quoyle’s character based on inferences from the text.)
2. diction, details, and figurative language.

Activity Three: Guided Annotation

1. Answers will vary. Most students will select the highly connotative words, like *monstrous*, *freakish*, *survived*, *grief*, *bereft*, *failure*. Be prepared to help students see the emotional associations of words like plastic or damp.
2. Answers will vary.
3. Students may select comparisons such as “like an explosion of virulent cells,” “a great damp loaf of a body,” or “head shaped like a crenshaw.”
4. A. Answers will vary. Students may write something such as the following:
Annie Proulx compares Quoyle’s head to a melon in paragraph 7 in order to reveal that Quoyle is not smart. The comparison creates this impression because a melon is a fruit; it doesn’t have a brain and can’t think. Quoyle just seems to shamble through life without much thought.
B. Answers will vary.
5. Answers will vary.
6. Answers will vary.
7. Answers will vary, but students should mention that the knowledge of how Quoyle was treated as a child creates sympathy for his character. His decisions to travel to Newfoundland, to try various jobs, to start college, to quit college, to go home from college on weekends even though he is mistreated all stem from reactions to his relationships with others.

8. Answers will vary, but students should recognize that Quoyle is reactive rather than proactive and that he is insecure and something of an outcast.

Activity Four: Making Inferences about Character Traits

Answers will vary, but students should be encouraged to fully annotate the text, not merely highlight or underline. Inferences about the character traits in the column to the left of the text should have corresponding explanations in the column to the right of the text.

2. Answers will vary depending on the character traits that they list.
3. Answers will vary.
4. Answers will vary.
5. Answers will vary.

The Shipping News— Characterization of the Protagonist

Activity One: Reading and Responding to the Text

Read the passage below and make notes as you read, recording your observations, thoughts, and questions about the text.

1 Here is an account of a few years in the life of Quoyle, born in Brooklyn and raised in a shuffle of dreary upstate towns.

2 Hive-spangled, gut roaring with gas and cramp, he survived childhood; at the state university, hand clapped over his chin, he camouflaged torment with smiles and silence. Stumbled through his twenties and into his thirties learning to separate his feelings from his life, counting on nothing. He ate prodigiously, liked a ham knuckle, buttered spuds.

3 His jobs: distributor of vending machine candy, all-night clerk in a convenience store, a third-rate newspaperman. At thirty-six, bereft, brimming with grief and thwarted love, Quoyle steered away to Newfoundland, the rock that had generated his ancestors, a place he had never been nor thought to go.

4 A watery place. And Quoyle feared water, could not swim. Again and again the father had broken his clenched grip and thrown him into pools, brooks, lakes, and surf. Quoyle knew the flavor of brack and waterweed.

5 From this youngest son's failure to dog-paddle the father saw other failures multiply like an explosion of virulent cells—failure to speak clearly; failure to sit up straight; failure to get up in the morning; failure in attitude; failure in ambition and ability; indeed, in everything. His own failure.

6 Quoyle shambled, a head taller than any child around him, was soft. He knew it. “Ah, you lout,” said the father. But no pygmy himself. And brother Dick, the father's favorite, pretended to throw up when Quoyle came into a room, hissed “Snotface, Ugly Pig, Warthog, Stupid, Stinkbomb, Greasebag,” pummeled and kicked until Quoyle curled, hands over head, sniveling, on the linoleum. All stemmed from Quoyle's chief failure, a failure of normal appearance.

7 A great damp loaf of a body. At six he weighed eighty pounds. At sixteen he was buried under a casement of flesh. Head shaped like a crenshaw¹, no neck, reddish hair ruched²

back. Features as bunched as kissed fingertips. Eyes the color of plastic. The monstrous chin, a freakish shelf jutting from the lower face.

8 Some anomalous gene had fired up at the moment of his begetting as a single spark sometimes leaps from banked coals, had given him a giant's chin. As a child he invented stratagems to deflect stares; a smile, downcast gaze, the right hand darting up to cover the chin.

9 His earliest sense of self was as a distant figure: there in the foreground was his family: here, at the limit of the far view, was he. Until he was fourteen he cherished the idea that he had been given to the wrong family, that somewhere his real people, saddled with the changeling of the Quoyles, longed for him. Then foraging in a box of excursion mementoes, he found photographs of his father beside brothers and sisters at a ship's rail. A girl, somewhat apart from the others, looked toward the sea, eyes squinted, as though she could see the port of destination a thousand miles south. Quoyle recognized himself in their hair, their legs, and arms. That sly-looking lump in the shrunken sweater, his father. On the back, scribbled in blue pencil, "Leaving Home, 1946."

10 At the university he took courses he couldn't understand, humped back and forth without speaking to anyone, went home for weekends of excoriation. At last he dropped out of school and looked for a job, kept his hand over his chin.

11 Nothing was clear to lonesome Quoyle. His thoughts churned like the amorphous thing that ancient sailors, drifting into arctic half-light, called the Sea Lung; a heaving sludge of ice under fog where air blurred into water, where liquid was solid, where solids dissolved, where the sky froze and light and dark muddled.

¹ A crenshaw is a variety of winter melon.

² A ruche is a pleat or ruffle used for decorating garments.

Activity Two: Reading and Understanding the Prompt

Read the writing prompt below, designed for this passage, and answer the questions that follow to clarify your understanding of the tasks of the prompt.

The following excerpt from the first chapter of Annie Proulx’s *The Shipping News* deals almost exclusively with the characterization of the protagonist, Quoye. Read the passage carefully. Then write an essay in which you analyze how the author uses diction, details, and figurative language to create a complex character.

1. Underline the abstract topic of the prompt.
2. List the concrete elements that you must discuss/analyze in the essay.

Activity Three: Guided Annotation

1. Using the text in Activity One, circle **connotative diction** used by Proulx to reveal elements of Quoye’s character.
2. Looking at the connotative diction that you circled, think about what kind of character the author is creating through those words. Write an assertion about Quoye’s character based on the connotative diction you circled.

3. Put boxes around the figurative language the author uses to describe Quoye.
4. Complete the statement below:

A. Annie Proulx compares Quoye (or Quoye’s) _____ to _____
 in paragraph _____ in order reveal that Quoye is _____.
 The comparison creates this impression because _____
 _____.

B. Write another statement of analysis about how Proulx uses figurative language to reveal Quoye’s character, using the frame statement above as a guide.

Activity Four: Making Inferences about Character Traits

1. As you read the passage below, underline textual evidence that leads you to an understanding of Quoyle’s character. In the column to the left of the text, list character traits that can be inferred from the text. In the column to the right of the text, explain your reasoning about how the text reveals the character trait listed. Make an inference about traits revealed in every paragraph. A sample has been done for you.

<u>Character Traits</u>		<u>Explanation of Reasoning</u>
<i>withdrawn</i>	<p>1 Here is an account of a few years in the life of Quoyle, born in Brooklyn and raised in a shuffle of dreary upstate towns.</p> <p>2 Hive-spangled, gut roaring with gas and cramp, he survived childhood; <u>at the state university, hand clapped over his chin, he camouflaged torment with smiles and silence.</u></p>	<p><i>Quoyle tries to hide his appearance, as well as his feelings, which he “camouflaged” from other college students.</i></p>
<i>unhappy</i>	<p>Stumbled through his twenties and into his thirties learning to separate his feelings from his life, counting on nothing. <u>He ate prodigiously, liked a ham knuckle, buttered spuds.</u></p> <p>3 His jobs: distributor of vending machine candy, all-night clerk in a convenience store, a third-rate newspaperman. At thirty-six, bereft, brimming with grief and thwarted love, Quoyle steered away to Newfoundland, the rock that had generated his ancestors, a place he had never been nor thought to go.</p>	
	<p>4 A watery place. And Quoyle feared water, could not swim. Again and again the father had broken his clenched grip and thrown him into pools, brooks, lakes, and surf. Quoyle knew the flavor of brack and waterweed.</p> <p>5 From this youngest son’s failure to dog-paddle the father saw other failures multiply like an explosion of virulent cells—failure to speak clearly; failure to sit up straight; failure to get up in the morning; failure in attitude; failure in ambition and ability; indeed, in everything. His own failure.</p> <p>6 Quoyle shambled, a head taller than any child around him, was soft. He knew it. “Ah, you lout,” said the father. But no pygmy himself. And brother Dick, the father’s favorite, pretended to throw up when Quoyle came into a room, hissed “Snotface, Ugly Pig, Warhog, Stupid, Stinkbomb, Greasebag,” pummeled and kicked until Quoyle curled, hands over head, sniveling, on the linoleum. All stemmed from Quoyle’s chief failure, a failure of normal appearance.</p> <p>7 A great damp loaf of a body. At six he weighed eighty pounds. At sixteen he was buried under a casement of flesh. Head shaped like a crenshaw¹, no neck, reddish hair rucked² back. Features as bunched as kissed fingertips. Eyes the color</p>	<p><i>Because of his unhappiness, he probably turns to food for comfort.</i></p>

of plastic. The monstrous chin, a freakish shelf jutting from the lower face.

8 Some anomalous gene had fired up at the moment of his begetting as a single spark sometimes leaps from banked coals, had given him a giant's chin. As a child he invented stratagems to deflect stares; a smile, downcast gaze, the right hand darting up to cover the chin.

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¹ A crenshaw is a variety of winter melon.

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2. Review the list of character traits in the column on the left. In the graphic organizer below, group the character traits into similar categories.

Category 1	Category 2	Category 3
What do these words have in common?	What do these words have in common?	What do these words have in common?

3. Write a statement about how the traits in one category impact or relate to the traits in the other categories to create Quoyle's complex character.

4. Using your work above as a guide, write a thesis statement to answer the questions of the writing prompt:

The following excerpt from the first chapter of Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News* deals almost exclusively with the characterization of the protagonist, Quoyle. Read the passage carefully. Then write an essay in which you analyze how the author uses diction, details, and figurative language to create a complex character.

Thesis:

5. List at least three pieces of textual evidence to support your thesis.