

Lesson 8: The Unreliable Narrator

What's on for today and why:

We're going to be looking at Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story "The Yellow Wallpaper" as a great example of a personal narrative where the narrator is very obviously not reliable. Since the students have been looking at the personal narratives from Golden's novel it is good for them to see a different kind of narrative where the narrator is not really capable of giving a clear picture of the events going on around her.

What to do:

1) First just ask if anyone has any questions about the story and go over those concerns. Then ask the students to start volunteering their opinions about having listened to the story as well as having read it.

2) Then create a chart on the board that has spaces for each character, the setting and the tone of the story. Then ask the students to use their notes from reading and hearing the story to fill in the chart with details of how they picture the characters and setting. Since there should be many different descriptions engage the students in a discussion about why they might have so many different views of things.

3) Now talk about how everything is described directly by the narrator. Is this how everyone pictured the story? Does everyone believe there were real people behind the wallpaper? The answers may vary a little, but the point is for the students to understand that the narrator is telling a story from a personal perspective and if the narrator has something wrong with them, such as a mental condition, their descriptions may not be very valid.

4) (Supposedly day 12) Talk a little about unreliable narrators and ask the students if they feel that any of the narrators they have encountered in Golden's novel are unreliable. Give them some time to go back into the novel, particularly the chapters they read the night before, and ask why or why not Golden's narrators are reliable.

How did it go?

This exercise is meant to get the students thinking for themselves. Many students often feel that if it is written,

especially written in the first person, information is perfectly valid and believable. Reading and listening to this story should help them to realize that personal narratives are even more susceptible to bias than any other kind of story. This should change the way they finish reading the novel. By having them go back and look at what they've already read you are asking them to question the narrators and the author as well as engage in a close reading exercise.