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Comparing and Contrasting Genres and Themes



Introduction

THEME: >>> Flights of Fancy

Literature is divided into many different **genres**, or kinds of literature. Books can be categorized into different genres based on subject matter. Books in a particular genre may have similar **themes** and **topics**. Mystery is an example of a genre. When you're reading a story that involves elements like danger, crime, puzzles, and detectives, you can identify it immediately as a mystery.

Realistic Fiction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • features characters who could be real • many authors write stories specifically about situations that modern people face
Historical Fiction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • features characters and events that existed in the past
Science Fiction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • features settings or unreal events that are not a part of reality as you know it • may have nonhuman characters or people living far in the future
Fantasy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • may feature humans with extraordinary powers, imaginary worlds, or fantastic creatures such as unicorns or vampires
Traditional Literature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • includes genres of stories that people have told for generations • myths explain something about nature or a people's customs or beliefs • legends are tales from the past about people and events, and are usually connected to a particular time or place • folktales are stories of ordinary people that contains a lesson about human behavior • fables are very short folktales in which the characters may be animals portrayed as human types. A fable usually has a moral, or lesson. • fairy tales involve magical creatures who interact with human beings in good and wicked ways

Look at this book cover. Then complete the chart below.



Genre	How I Know

When you recognize the genre, you can understand better where authors are taking you and how they mean for you to enjoy their work.

Read the first of the paired selections. Then answer the questions.

excerpt from Understood Betsy

by Dorothy Canfield

1 You can imagine, perhaps, the dreadful terror of Elizabeth Ann as the train carried her along toward Vermont and the horrible Putney Farm! It had happened so quickly—her satchel packed, the telegram sent, the train caught—that she had not had time to get her wits together, assert herself, and say that she would not go there! Besides, she had a sinking notion that perhaps they wouldn't pay any attention to her if she did. The world had come to an end now that Aunt Frances wasn't there to take care of her! Even in the most familiar air she could only half breathe without Aunt Frances! And now she was not even being taken to the Putney Farm! She was being sent!

2 She shrank together in her seat, more and more frightened as the end of her journey came nearer, and looked out dismally at the winter landscape, thinking it hideous with its brown bare fields, its brown bare trees, and the quick-running little streams hurrying along, swollen with the January thaw which had taken all the snow from the hills. She had heard her elders say about her so many times that she could not stand the cold, that she shivered at the very thought of cold weather, and certainly nothing could look colder than that bleak country into which the train was now slowly making its way.

3 ...Poor Elizabeth Ann's knees knocked against each other with fear of the strange faces she was to encounter, and when the conductor came to help her get off, he had to carry the white, trembling child as well as her satchel. But there was only one strange face there,—not another soul in sight at the little wooden station. A grim-faced old man in a fur cap and heavy coat stood by a lumber wagon.

4 "This is her, Mr. Putney," said the conductor, touching his cap, and went back to the train, which went away shrieking for a nearby crossing and setting the echoes ringing from one mountain to another.

5 There was Elizabeth Ann alone with her much-feared Great-uncle Henry. He nodded to her, and drew out from the bottom of the wagon a warm, large cape, which he slipped over her shoulders. "The women folks were afraid you'd git cold drivin'," he explained. He then lifted her high to the seat, tossed her satchel into the wagon, climbed up himself, and clucked to his horses. Elizabeth Ann had always before thought it an essential part of railway journeys to be much kissed at the end and asked a great many times how you had "stood the trip."

6 She sat very still on the high lumber seat, feeling very forlorn and neglected. Her feet dangled high above the floor of the wagon. She felt herself to be in the most dangerous place she had ever dreamed of

in her worst dreams. Oh, why wasn't Aunt Frances there to take care of her! It was just like one of her bad dreams—yes, it was horrible! She would fall, she would roll under the wheels and be crushed to... She looked up at Uncle Henry with the wild, strained eyes of nervous terror which always brought Aunt Frances to her in a rush to “hear all about it,” to sympathize, to reassure.

7 Uncle Henry looked down at her soberly, his hard, weather-beaten old face quite unmoved. “Here, you drive, will you, for a piece?” he said briefly, putting the reins into her hands, hooking his spectacles over his ears, and drawing out a stubby pencil and a bit of paper. “I’ve got some figgering to do. You pull on the left-hand rein to make ‘em go to the left and t’other way for t’other way, though ‘tain’t likely we’ll meet any teams.”

Think About It

How can you determine the genre of this story? First, ask yourself some questions about the story.

Are the characters in the story realistic or magical? _____

Is the story taking place in the past or in modern times? _____

Does the story have imaginary creatures or unrealistic events? _____

Does the story teach a moral or lesson? _____

What genre is this story? Explain how you know.

Read the second of the paired selections. Then answer the question.

Alone

by Edgar Allan Poe

From childhood's hour I have not been
 As others were, I have not seen
 As others saw, I could not bring
 My passions from a common spring,
 5 From the same source I have not taken
 My sorrow, I could not awaken
 My heart to joy at the same tone,
 And all I loved, I loved alone,
 Thou, in my childhood, in the dawn
 10 Of a most stormy life, was drawn
 From every depth of good and ill
 The mystery which binds me still,
 From the torrent, or the fountain,
 From the red cliff of the mountain,
 15 From the sun that round me roll'd
 In its autumn tint of gold,
 From the lightning in the sky
 As it passed me flying by,
 From the thunder and the storm,
 20 And the cloud that took the form
 (When the rest of Heaven was blue)
 Of a demon in my view.

A CLOSER LOOK

You can compare and contrast how similar themes are addressed in different genres. In the first eight lines of "Alone," underline how the poet shows that he feels different from others.

What feelings do Elizabeth Ann and the narrator of "Alone" reveal to the reader?

What theme is common to both the story and the poem?

- A Only adults can regret the loss of youth.
- B Children experience loneliness and inner torment.
- C The life of a traveler can lead to exciting drama.
- D People without manners lack friends.

DISCUSS IT

Imagine a conversation between Elizabeth Ann and the narrator of the poem. How might their dialogue reveal more about their feelings of being isolated and dejected? What background might Elizabeth Ann and the narrator have in common? Discuss the answers to these questions in a small group.

A CLOSER LOOK

Underline details that show this story probably could not have happened in real life.

Read the paired selections. Then answer the questions.

excerpt from Looking Backward

by Edward Bellamy

1 When I awoke it was broad daylight in the room, which had been lighted artificially when I was awake before. My mysterious host was sitting near. He was not looking at me when I opened my eyes, and I had a good opportunity to study him and meditate upon my extraordinary situation, before he observed that I was awake. My giddiness was all gone, and my mind perfectly clear. The story that I had been asleep 113 years, which, in my former weak and bewildered condition, I had accepted without question, recurred to me now only to be rejected as a preposterous attempt at an imposture, the motive of which it was impossible remotely to surmise.

2 Something extraordinary had certainly happened to account for my waking up in this strange house with this unknown companion, but my fancy was utterly impotent to suggest more than the wildest guess as to what that something might have been. Could it be that I was the victim of some sort of conspiracy? It looked so, certainly; and yet, if human lineaments ever gave true evidence, it was certain that this man by my side, with a face so refined and ingenuous, was no party to any scheme of crime or outrage. Then it occurred to me to question if I might not be the butt of some elaborate practical joke on the part of friends who had somehow learned the secret of my underground chamber and taken this means of impressing me with the peril of mesmeric experiments. There were great difficulties in the way of this theory; Sawyer would never have betrayed me, nor had I any friends at all likely to undertake such an enterprise; nevertheless the supposition that I was the victim of a practical joke seemed on the whole the only one tenable. Half expecting to catch a glimpse of some familiar face grinning from behind a chair or curtain, I looked carefully about the room. When my eyes next rested on my companion, he was looking at me.

3 “You have had a fine nap of 12 hours,” he said briskly, “and I can see that it has done you good. You look much better. Your color is good, and your eyes are bright. How do you feel?”

4 “I never felt better,” I said, sitting up.

5 “You remember your first waking, no doubt,” he pursued, “and your surprise when I told you how long you had been asleep?”

6 “You said, I believe, that I had slept 113 years.”

7 “Exactly.”

8 “You will admit,” I said, with an ironical smile, “that the story was rather an improbable one.”

9 “Extraordinary, I admit,” he responded, “but given the proper conditions, not improbable nor inconsistent with what we know of the trance state. When complete, as in your case, the vital functions are absolutely suspended, and there is no waste of the tissues. No limit can be set to the possible duration of a trance when the external conditions protect the body from physical injury. This trance of yours is indeed the longest of which there is any positive record, but there is no known reason wherefore, had you not been discovered and had the chamber in which we found you continued intact, you might not have remained in a state of suspended animation till, at the end of indefinite ages, the gradual refrigeration of the earth had destroyed the bodily tissues and set the spirit free.”

10 I had to admit that, if I were indeed the victim of a practical joke, its authors had chosen an admirable agent for carrying out their imposition. The impressive and even eloquent manner of this man would have lent dignity to an argument that the moon was made of cheese. The smile with which I had regarded him as he advanced his trance hypothesis did not appear to confuse him in the slightest degree.

excerpt from The New Girl at St. Chad's

by Angela Brazil

1 “What about this new girl?” persisted Madge. “Hasn't anybody seen her?”

2 “No. She's been in there ever since she arrived.”

3 “Don't talk so loud; she'll hear you.”

4 “I don't care if she does.”

5 “I want to know what she's doing.”

6 “I can tell you, then,” said Chatty Burns, in a whisper that was more audible by far than her ordinary voice.

7 “What?”

8 “Crying! New girls always cry, and some old ones too, if you take Pauline as a specimen.”

9 “I'm not crying now!” protested Pauline indignantly. “And how can you tell that the new girl is?”

10 Why should she have drawn her curtains so closely? If she's not lying on her bed, with a clean pocket-handkerchief to her eyes, I'll give you six caramels in exchange for three peppermint creams!”

A CLOSER LOOK

Underline sentences that show that Honor Fitzgerald could be a real character who existed.

11 “Then you’re just mistaken!” cried a voice from the end cubicle. The chintz curtain was pulled aside, and out marched a figure with so jaunty an air as to banish utterly the idea of possible homesickness or tears.

12 It was a girl of about 15, a remarkably pretty girl (so her schoolmates decided, without an instant’s hesitation), and rather out of the common. She had a clear, olive complexion, a lovely color in her cheeks, a bewitching pair of dimples, and a perfect colt’s mane of thick, curly, brown hair. Her eyes were beyond praise, large and grey, with a dark line round the iris, and shaded by long lashes; and they were so soft, and wistful, and winning, and yet so twinkling and full of fun, that they seemed as if they could compel admiration, and make friends with their first glance. The girl walked across the room in an easy, confident fashion, and stood, with a broad smile on her face, beaming at the seven others seated on Maisie’s bed.

13 “Why shouldn’t I pull my curtains?” she asked. “If I’d been pulling faces, now, you might have had some cause for complaint. You look rather a nice set; I think I’m going to like you.”

14 The girls were so surprised that they could only stare. It seemed reversing the usual order of things for a new-comer, who ought to be shy and confused, to be so absolutely and entirely self-possessed, and to pass judgment with such calm assurance upon these old members of St. Chad’s, some of whom were already in their third year.

15 “Perhaps I’d better introduce myself,” continued the stranger. “My name is Honor Fitzgerald, and I come from Kilmore in County Kerry.”

16 “Then you’re Irish!” gasped Chatty Burns.

17 “Quite right. First class for geography! It’s a more hospitable place than this is. I’ve been here nearly two hours, and nobody has offered me any refreshments yet. I’m simply starving!”

18 ...The new girl was so utterly different from anybody else who had ever come to St. Chad’s that the others waited with curiosity to hear what she would say next.

19 “Well?” she enquired coolly at last. “I suppose you’re thinking me over. I should like to know your opinion of me. They tell me at home that my nose turns up, and my tongue is too long. But I didn’t turn up my nose at the Edinburgh rock, did I?—and as for my tongue, it fits my mouth, as a general rule, though it runs away sometimes.”

Which story has events that are unrealistic, and which has events that could happen in real life?

How did the characters face a similar set of circumstances, and how did they respond?

What different emotions do the narrator and Honor Fitzgerald feel?

1 What are the genres of the two stories? Use details from the stories to explain how you know.

2 Part A

Compare *Looking Backward* and *The New Girl at St. Chad's*. What do they *most* have in common?

- A plot
- B theme
- C setting
- D characters

Part B

What evidence from the text supports the answer to Part A?

3 What is different about how the characters in the two stories handle their new situations?

Read the paired selections. Then answer the questions.

excerpt from The First Men in the Moon

by H. G. Wells

- 1 “Confound it!” I cried; “I’m a fool! What business have I here? I’m not coming, Cavor. The thing’s too risky. I’m getting out.”
- 2 “You can’t,” he said.
- 3 “Can’t! We’ll soon see about that!”
- 4 He made no answer for ten seconds. “It’s too late for us to quarrel now, Bedford,” he said. “That little jerk was the start. Already we are flying as swiftly as a bullet up into the gulf of space.”
- 5 “I—” I said, and then it didn’t seem to matter what happened. For a time I was, as it were, stunned; I had nothing to say. It was just as if I had never heard of this idea of leaving the world before. Then I perceived an unaccountable change in my bodily sensations. It was a feeling of lightness, of unreality. Coupled with that was a queer sensation in the head, an apoplectic effect almost, and a thumping of blood vessels at the ears. Neither of these feelings diminished as time went on, but at last I got so used to them that I experienced no inconvenience.
- 6 I heard a click, and a little glow lamp came into being.
- 7 I saw Cavor’s face, as white as I felt my own to be. We regarded one another in silence. The transparent blackness of the glass behind him made him seem as though he floated in a void.
- 8 “Well, we’re committed,” I said at last.
- 9 “Yes,” he said, “we’re committed.”
- 10 “Don’t move,” he exclaimed, at some suggestion of a gesture. “Let your muscles keep quite lax—as if you were in bed. We are in a little universe of our own. Look at those things!”
- 11 He pointed to the loose cases and bundles that had been lying on the blankets in the bottom of the sphere. I was astonished to see that they were floating now nearly a foot from the spherical wall. Then I saw from his shadow that Cavor was no longer leaning against the glass. I thrust out my hand behind me, and found that I, too, was suspended in space, clear of the glass.
- 12 I did not cry out nor gesticulate, but fear came upon me. It was like being held and lifted by something—you know not what. The mere touch of my hand against the glass moved me rapidly. I understood what had happened, but that did not prevent my being afraid. We were cut off from all exterior gravitation, only the attraction of objects within our sphere had effect. Consequently everything that was not fixed to the glass was falling—slowly because of the slowness of our masses—towards the centre of gravity of our

little world, which seemed to be somewhere about the middle of the sphere, but rather nearer to myself than Cavor, on account of my greater weight.

13 “We must turn round,” said Cavor, “and float back to back, with the things between us.”

14 It was the strangest sensation conceivable, floating thus loosely in space, at first indeed horribly strange, and when the horror passed, not disagreeable at all, exceeding restful; indeed, the nearest thing in earthly experience to it that I know is lying on a very thick, soft feather bed. But the quality of utter detachment and independence! I had not reckoned on things like this. I had expected a violent jerk at starting, a giddy sense of speed. Instead I felt—as if I were disembodied. It was not like the beginning of a journey; it was like the beginning of a dream.

The *Eagle* Has Landed

CAST:

NEIL ARMSTRONG

BUZZ ALDRIN

CONTROLLER AND THE CREW AT MISSION CONTROL

Astronauts NEIL ARMSTRONG and BUZZ ALDRIN are in the lunar module Eagle and starting their descent to the moon. ARMSTRONG is at the control panel.

ARMSTRONG: It looks like our range is a tad off, Buzz. We’re four miles downrange from our initial touchdown point.

ALDRIN: *(yelling)* Watch out for that crater!

ARMSTRONG: *(narrowing his eyes)* I’m going to have to improvise and manually pilot the *Eagle* down into the Sea of Tranquility. This region is littered with boulders. *(sighs)* It’s going to be tricky; the unknowns are rampant and there are a thousand things to worry about.

ALDRIN: *(pats Armstrong’s shoulder)* I have every confidence that you’ll land us safely on the moon, Neil.

The Eagle’s computer alarms sound off as the lunar module descends.

ARMSTRONG: Engine stop. It’s 4:18 p.m. eastern daylight time. Houston, Tranquility Base here. The *Eagle* has landed.

There’s the sound of celebration, cheers, whistling, and clapping, at Mission Control in Houston.

CONTROLLER: Roger, Tranquility, we copy you on the ground. You got a bunch of guys about to turn blue, but we’re breathing again.

ARMSTRONG: *(yawning)* I think we’ve earned ourselves a snack and a quick catnap before we descend to the lunar surface.

ALDRIN: I'm too energized to eat or sleep. Where's the TV camera? I'll check it over to make sure that there are no glitches when we transmit this monumental event back to Earth.

ARMSTRONG *eats a snack and then reclines strapped in a chair while ALDRIN examines the TV camera. Nearly four hours pass. Then ARMSTRONG starts descending the ladder from the Eagle.*

ARMSTRONG: I'm at the foot of the ladder now, about one or two inches from the surface of the moon. Okay, I'm going to step off the ladder now.

ARMSTRONG *steps off with one foot.*

ARMSTRONG: That's one small step for man; one giant leap for mankind.

ARMSTRONG *steps down with his other foot and examines the soil disturbance.*

ARMSTRONG: The surface is fine and powdery, like powdered charcoal. When I kick it up loosely with my toe it adheres in fine layers to my boot. I estimate that I'm sinking in a small fraction of an inch, but the treads of my boots are visible on the moon's surface.

ARMSTRONG *turns up toward ALDRIN, who is descending the ladder.*

ARMSTRONG: Careful with that TV camera, Buzz. You're about to record historic images for everyone back on planet Earth.

ALDRIN *steps onto the lunar surface and sets up the TV camera on a tripod. He looks around at the lunar surface in awe.*

ALDRIN: What magnificent desolation!

1 Part A

Which *best* describes the genres of these two pieces?

- A fairy tale and science fiction
- B science fiction and historical fiction
- C fantasy and fable
- D fable and historical fiction

Part B

Explain the difference between the two genres in your answer to Part A.

2 Compare “The First Men in the Moon” with “The *Eagle* Has Landed.” What do they *most* have in common?

- A suspenseful plots
- B overcoming obstacles
- C a modern setting
- D real-life characters

3 What is one significant difference between the two passages?

4 Self-preservation and exploring new universes are themes in both texts. Which text more effectively represents this theme, and why?
