



## Lesson: Nonfiction Character Analysis

### OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students will conduct nonfiction character analyses of a New Orleans resident named Carolyn Parker, who was filmed for a documentary following the Hurricane Katrina disaster in 2005. They will watch a series of video clips in which Carolyn Parker speaks for her community, shares her first encounter with segregation, talks about her mother and grandmother, tells a story about her work as a chef and describes her reaction to Hurricane Katrina. Students will collect details from these clips about Parker's background and personal characteristics and then organize this information into character analysis essays.

For more information on Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward and conducting character analysis, please see the [Resources](#) section of this lesson.

The clips used in this lesson are from the film *I'm Carolyn Parker: The Good, the Mad, and the Beautiful*, a documentary by Jonathan Demme that shows post-Katrina New Orleans as told through the experiences of Carolyn Parker, a lifelong resident of the Lower Ninth Ward.

POV offers a lending library of DVDs that you can borrow anytime during the school year—FOR FREE! Get started by joining our [Community Network](#).

### OBJECTIVES

By the end of this lesson, students will:

- Study an interactive map that shows how the city of New Orleans was flooded in 2005 as a result of Hurricane Katrina.
- Interpret the background and characteristics of a woman seen in a series of video clips.
- Write character analysis essays based on their observations from the video.

### GRADE LEVELS

6-12

### SUBJECT AREAS

Language Arts, Journalism, Current Events, U.S. History, Geography, Social Studies

### MATERIALS

- Internet access and equipment to show an interactive map and watch online video
- Handout: "[Character Analysis Essay Organizer](#)" (PDF file)

### ESTIMATED TIME NEEDED

One 50-minute class period

## FILM CLIPS

Clip 1: "They Heard Me" (length 2:31)

The clip begins at 6:34 when Carolyn Parker says, "And when I went to the Sheraton..." It ends at 9:05 when she says, "I'm not going anywhere."

Clip 2: "Mother's Dresses" (length 1:02)

The clip begins at 24:41 when Parker says, "I would sew..." It ends at 25:43 when she says, "She looked gorgeous."

Clip 3: "No Recipes" (length 1:39)

The clips starts at 27:20 when Parker says, "I got my license to be a chef." It ends at 28:59 when she says, "So I retired in '95."

Clip 4: "First Encounter With Segregation" (length 1:43)

The clip begins at 39:42 when Parker says, "My grandmother was fair..." It ends at 41:25 when she says, "...my first encounter with segregation."

Clip 5: "Grandmother's Cooking" (length 1:46)

The clip begins at 41:30 when Parker says, "Now when that grease get real hot..." It ends at 43:16 when she says, "...this is the way I came up."

Clip 6: "Reaction to Katrina" (length 1:13)

The clip begins at 1:19:12 when Parker says, "After the hurricane..." It ends at 1:20:25 when she says, "...but it wasn't."

## ACTIVITY

1. Give each student a handout and explain that the class is going to conduct a character analysis of an actual person named Carolyn Parker, who struggled to rebuild her house in New Orleans, Louisiana, after it was ravaged by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Parker was filmed over a period of five years following Katrina, and this footage was organized into the documentary *I'm Carolyn Parker: The Good, the Mad, and the Beautiful*. Students are going to watch clips from this film in order to learn more about Parker and write character analysis essays about her.

2. Show students the interactive map [Flash Flood](http://www.nola.com/katrina/graphics/flashflood.swf)

(<http://www.nola.com/katrina/graphics/flashflood.swf>) to remind them or inform them that Hurricane Katrina devastated the city of New Orleans and drove more than one million people from their homes. Point out that Carolyn Parker lives in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans, which is shown flooding in "Scene 8" of the map.

3. Explain that after the floodwaters receded from the Lower Ninth Ward, Parker returned to her damaged home and was determined to live there and rebuild. In January 2006, she attended a meeting where government leaders talked about strategies to redevelop New Orleans, including a requirement for neighborhoods like the Lower Ninth Ward to prove that at least half of their residents planned to return. Otherwise, the government would have the right to buy out homeowners or seize their property outright. Show students Clip 1: "They Heard Me" (length 2:31) so they can see how Parker responded.

4. Ask students what they learned about Parker from watching the clip. Discuss student responses and provide guidance to students on how to capture relevant details on their handouts. Emphasize the importance of accuracy when describing Parker and of identifying evidence to support their portrayals of her.

5. Have students then work with partners to watch and discuss the other five video clips for this lesson and finish the handout.

6. Ask students to use the information from their completed handouts to write character analysis essays about Carolyn Parker.

## EXTENSIONS

1. Use the character analysis essays about Carolyn Parker as a basis for other classroom activities, such as:

- Identify “Carolyn Parkers” in your community and conduct character studies of these individuals and/or create videos that tell their stories. Reference video and text character studies ([http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/newyorkandregion/columns/character\\_study/index.html](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/newyorkandregion/columns/character_study/index.html)) from *The New York Times* for inspiration.
- Discuss how taking a close look at people affected by different news stories can add perspective and improve understanding of current events. Have students identify examples of news organizations featuring such individuals in their reporting. What are the pros and cons of such coverage? What might make it more effective?
- Write creative nonfiction stories, poems, monologues or other works from the perspective of Carolyn Parker or from the perspective of someone in the local community who has been the subject of a character study as that person reacts to a local issue.
- Compare and contrast Carolyn Parker with characters in books, short stories or plays that have been studied in class.

2. Explore food connections to family and heritage. Have students watch Clip 5: “Grandmother’s Cooking” (length 1:46) and discuss in small groups different factors that have influenced how their families eat. For example, have family meals been affected by places where family members have lived in the past? How has the availability of certain ingredients played a role in which dishes are prepared? Then help the class organize a potluck where they share favorite family dishes and the recipes for them.

3. Investigate what ties people to certain communities. As a class, watch the FRONTLINE video, “The Way We Were” (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/katrina/view/special.html>) (length 2:54) and discuss how the people in the clip describe what it was like to grow up in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans. What do students think motivates Carolyn Parker and others to return to this community and face the challenges involved in rebuilding? If a natural disaster destroyed your community, would you return and rebuild? Why or why not?

4. Study art created by New Orleans artists after Hurricane Katrina devastated the city. Have small student groups explore the art of Thomas Mann and Jana Napoli featured in

the PBS Arts online exhibit, “Ruin and Revival” (<http://www.pbs.org/arts/exhibit/ruin-and-revival>). Then, discuss: What messages are conveyed in these works? What symbols are used? What stories are told? What stories seem to be missing from the exhibit? What does this art tell you about New Orleans? What role does art play in the recovery of the city? Have students then write reviews of the exhibit that capture their analyses.

5. Explore additional PBS video relating to the struggle to rebuild after Hurricane Katrina:

- *Craft in America: Messages* (<http://video.pbs.org/video/1949131631>) includes a chapter on New Orleans artist Thomas Mann, whose *Storm Cycle* series tells personal stories of Katrina with a sense of humor about the human condition and a nod to resilience following catastrophe.
- *The Old Man and the Storm* (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/katrina/>) tells the story of the Gettridge family in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans as they struggle to rebuild their homes and their lives after Hurricane Katrina.
- *The Storm* (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/storm/>) is a 2005 report produced weeks after Hurricane Katrina that includes dramatic footage and interviews with city, state and federal government officials about their response.
- *Tavis Smiley: Right to Return* (<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/tavissmiley/features/right-to-return/>) features additional post-Katrina footage shot in the Lower Ninth Ward by filmmaker Jonathan Demme, who directed and produced *I'm Carolyn Parker: The Good, the Mad, and the Beautiful*. One clip features Carolyn Parker's daughter, Kyrah Julian. An interview with Demme is also provided.

## RESOURCES

### Character Studies

#### Non-fiction Characters

<http://www.thebolditalic.com/MichelleBroderVanDyke/stories/1135-non-fiction-characters>

This article provides nonfiction character descriptions and sketches of members of a used bookstore community in the San Francisco Bay Area. It demonstrates a creative way to portray and think about actual people who participate in community events as characters.

#### Writer's Digest: Craft True-to-Life Nonfiction Characters

<http://www.writersdigest.com/writing-articles/by-writing-goal/improve-my-writing/craft-true-to-life-nonfiction-characters>

This article describes strategies for using character analysis in writing nonfiction.

### Hurricane Katrina

#### FRONTLINE: The Storm: 14 Days — A Timeline

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/storm/etc/cron.html>

This page provides a chronology of events during two weeks before, during and after Hurricane Katrina.

**NOVA: Storm That Drowned a City**

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/earth/storm-that-drowned-city.html>

This site investigates the science of Hurricane Katrina and provides analysis of what went wrong. Resources include a breakdown of the storm's anatomy and satellite pictures depicting how New Orleans flooded.

***The Times-Picayune: Multiple Failures***

<http://www.nola.com/images/hp/breachedlevees120805.pdf>

This graphic demonstrates how the levee system in New Orleans failed to protect city residents from the floodwaters of Hurricane Katrina.

**The Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans****FRONTLINE: “The Way We Were”**

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/katrina/view/special.html>

This video clip (length 2:54) features several lifelong residents of the Lower Ninth Ward describing what it was like to grow up there.

**PBS NewsHour: The Ninth Ward: Five Years Later:**

[http://www.pbs.org/newshour/multimedia/20100825\\_ninthward/](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/multimedia/20100825_ninthward/)

This audio slideshow looks at what has changed in the Ninth Ward in New Orleans—and what hasn't—five years after Hurricane Katrina devastated the area.

**POV Background: Lower Ninth Ward**

<http://www.pbs.org/pov/carolynparker/>

This resource provides a basic history of this New Orleans neighborhood.

**STANDARDS****Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts**

(<http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards/>)

SL.6-8.1. Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups and teacher-led) with diverse partners on [grade appropriate] topics, texts and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

SL.6.2. Interpret information presented in diverse media and formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) and explain how it contributes to a topic, text or issue under study.

W.6-12.2. Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts and information through the selection, organization and analysis of relevant content.

W.6-12.4. Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience.

**Content Knowledge:** (<http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/>) a compilation of content standards and benchmarks for K-12 curriculum by McRel (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning).

Arts and Communication, Standard 4: Understands ways in which the human experience is transmitted and reflected in the arts and communication.

Behavioral Studies, Standard 1: Understands that group and cultural influences contribute to human development, identity and behavior.

Civics, Standard 14: Understands issues concerning the disparities between ideals and reality in American political and social life.

Civics, Standard 17: Understands issues concerning the relationship between state and local governments and the national government and issues pertaining to representation at all three levels of government.

Geography, Standard 6: Understands that culture and experience influence people's perceptions of places and regions.

Geography, Standard 9: Understands the nature, distribution and migration of human populations on Earth's surface.

Geography, Standard 10: Understands the nature and complexity of Earth's cultural mosaics.

Health, Standard 2: Knows environmental and external factors that affect individual and community health.

Language Arts, Standard 1: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process.

Language Arts, Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.

United States History, Standard 31: Understands economic, social and cultural developments in the contemporary United States.

Visual Arts, Standard 4: Understands the visual arts in relation to history and cultures.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Cari Ladd, M.Ed., is an educational writer with a background in secondary education and media development. Previously, she served as PBS Interactive's director of education, overseeing the development of curricular resources tied to PBS programs, the PBS TeacherSource website (now PBS Teachers) and online teacher professional development services. She has also taught in Maryland and Northern Virginia.