

Jeremiah's Song

Short Story by Walter Dean Myers

When is a story a TREASURE?



R3.5 Identify the speaker and recognize the difference between **first- and third-person narration** (e.g., autobiography compared with biography).

Also included in this lesson: W1.1 (p. 461), **LC1.1** (p. 461)

KEY IDEA Some stories are forgotten as soon as the words leave the storyteller's lips. Other stories are passed from one generation to the next. Think about what makes a story a **treasure**—something worth remembering and sharing with others. Does it matter if it is funny, sad, or scary? Does the story have to teach you something? In "Jeremiah's Song," the young characters consider the value of an older man's stories.

QUICKWRITE In a journal entry, briefly describe a story that is meaningful to you. The story can be one you have heard, read, or seen. Explain why this story is important to you.





LITERARY ANALYSIS: STYLE

Each writer's **style**, or way of communicating ideas, is unique—like a fingerprint. It is often the writer's style that makes a story memorable. In this story, Walter Dean Myers's style comes across through elements such as

- **Point of view**—Myers chooses to tell the story from a first-person point of view, using a child as the narrator.
- **Dialogue**—Myers brings the characters to life by re-creating the way they actually speak.
- **Word choice**—Myers uses precise descriptions, vivid adjectives, and unusual comparisons to create memorable images.

As you read "Jeremiah's Song," notice how Myers uses these style elements.

READING STRATEGY: MONITOR

To avoid becoming confused as you read, it is good to occasionally check, or **monitor**, your understanding. One way to monitor is to **clarify** what you've read. This means you stop and make sure that you can clearly explain what has happened. If not, reread and look for clues in the selection to help you restate the information in your own words.

As you read, pause to clarify meaning. It may help to use a chart like the one shown.

<i>This Confuses Me</i>	<i>My Words</i>

VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

Myers uses the boldfaced words to help tell the story of an older man. To see how many you know, restate each sentence using a different word or phrase in place of the boldfaced word.

1. Grandpa has a serious **condition**, but it can be treated.
2. The doctor made a **diagnosis** about what was wrong.
3. He couldn't move his arm after he had a **stroke**.
4. Getting a cold was only a small **setback** in his recovery.

Role Models

Walter Dean Myers once said that people should have role models with whom they can identify. Myers's foster father and grandfather were his role models.



Walter Dean Myers
born 1937

Both were gifted storytellers, and Myers has followed in their footsteps. Throughout his writing career, Myers has introduced his readers to fictional and real African-American role models.

Getting to Know His Characters

Pictures are important to Myers's writing experience. When he is working on a story, he cuts out pictures of people who look the way he imagines his characters should look. His wife creates a collage of the pictures, and he hangs it over his computer. When Myers sits down to write each day, he sees the characters and feels as if he is getting to know them better all the time.



MORE ABOUT THE AUTHOR

For more on Walter Dean Myers, visit the Literature Center at ClassZone.com.

Background

Storytelling Tradition Storytelling has a long history in the African-American community. Stories of family ties, folklore, faith, and struggles for civil rights create strong bonds from one generation to the next. In "Jeremiah's Song," Grandpa Jeremiah shares the stories of his ancestors with the young people in his life.

JEREMIAH'S Song

WALTER
DEAN
MYERS

I knowed my cousin Ellie was gonna be mad when Macon Smith come around to the house. She didn't have no use for Macon even when things was going right, and when Grandpa Jeremiah was fixing to die I just knowed she wasn't gonna be liking him hanging around. Grandpa Jeremiah raised Ellie after her folks died and they used to be real close. Then she got to go on to college and when she come back the first year she was different. She didn't want to hear all them stories he used to tell her anymore. Ellie said the stories wasn't true, and that's why she didn't want to hear them.

10 I didn't know if they was true or not. Tell the truth I didn't think much on it either way, but I liked to hear them stories. Grandpa Jeremiah said they wasn't stories anyway, they was songs.

"They the songs of my people," he used to say.

I didn't see how they was songs, not regular songs anyway. Every little thing we did down in Curry seemed to matter to Ellie that first summer she come home from college. You couldn't do nothin' that was gonna please her. She didn't even come to church much. 'Course she come on Sunday or everybody would have had a regular fit, but she didn't come on Thursday nights and she didn't come on Saturday even though she used
20 to sing in the gospel choir. **A**

"I guess they teachin' her somethin' worthwhile up there at Greensboro," Grandpa Jeremiah said to Sister Todd. "I sure don't see what it is, though."

ANALYZE VISUALS

What kind of music do you think this person is playing? Explain your answer.

A MONITOR

Reread lines 1–20. Clarify the relationship between Grandpa Jeremiah and Ellie. When and how did it change? Record your answer in your chart.



“You ain’t never had no book learning, Jeremiah,” Sister Todd shot back. She wiped at where a trickle of sweat made a little path through the white dusting powder she put on her chest to keep cool. “Them old ways you got ain’t got nothing for these young folks.”

“I guess you right,” Grandpa Jeremiah said.

He said it but I could see he didn’t like it none. He was a big man with a big head and had most all his hair even if it was white. All that summer, 30 instead of sitting on the porch telling stories like he used to when I was real little, he would sit out there by himself while Ellie stayed in the house and watched the television or read a book. Sometimes I would think about asking him to tell me one of them stories he used to tell but they was too scary now that I didn’t have nobody to sleep with but myself. I asked Ellie to sleep with me but she wouldn’t.

“You’re nine years old,” she said, sounding real proper. “You’re old enough to sleep alone.”

I *knew* that. I just wanted her to sleep with me because I liked sleeping with her. Before she went off to college she used to put cocoa butter on 40 her arms and face and it would smell real nice. When she come back from college she put something else on, but that smelled nice too.

It was right after Ellie went back to school that Grandpa Jeremiah had him a **stroke** and Macon started coming around. I think his mama probably made him come at first, but you could see he liked it. Macon had always been around, sitting over near the stuck window at church or going on the blueberry truck when we went picking down at Mister Gregory’s place. For a long time he was just another kid, even though he was older’n me, but then, all of a sudden, he growed something fierce. I used to be up to his shoulder one time and then, before I could turn around good, I was 50 only up to his shirt pocket. He changed too. When he used to just hang around with the other boys and play ball or shoot at birds he would laugh a lot. He didn’t laugh so much anymore and I figured he was just about grown. When Grandpa got sick he used to come around and help out with things around the house that was too hard for me to do. I mean, I could have done all the chores, but it would just take me longer. **B**

When the work for the day was finished and the sows¹ fed, Grandpa would kind of ease into one of his stories and Macon, he would sit and listen to them and be real interested. I didn’t mind listening to the stories when Grandpa told them to Macon because he would be telling them in 60 the middle of the afternoon and they would be past my mind by the time I had to go to bed. **C**

stroke (strōk) *n.* a sudden, severe attack; a sudden loss of blood flow to the brain, often leading to physical or mental damage

B **STYLE**

By using **first-person point of view**, Myers can share the narrator’s thoughts. What do we learn about the narrator through his description of Macon in lines 47–55?

C **MONITOR**

Reread lines 58–61. What does the narrator mean when he says that the stories “would be past my mind by the time I had to go to bed”?

1. sows: adult female hogs.

Macon had an old guitar he used to mess with, too. He wasn't too bad on it, and sometimes Grandpa would tell him to play us a tune. He could play something he called "the Delta Blues" real good, but when Sister Todd or somebody from the church come around he'd play "Precious Lord" or "Just a Closer Walk With Thee."

Grandpa Jeremiah had been feeling poorly from that stroke, and one of his legs got a little drag to it. Just about the time Ellie come from school the next summer he was real sick. He was breathing loud so you could
70 hear it even in the next room, and he would stay in bed a lot even when there was something that needed doing or fixing.

"I don't think he's going to make it much longer," Dr. Crawford said. "The only thing I can do is to give him something for the pain."

"Are you sure of your **diagnosis**?" Ellie asked. She was sitting around the table with Sister Todd, Deacon² Turner, and his little skinny wife.

Dr. Crawford looked at Ellie like he was surprised to hear her talking. "Yes, I'm sure," he said. "He had tests a few weeks ago and his **condition** was bad then."

"How much time he got?" Sister Todd asked.

80 "Maybe a week or two at best," Dr. Crawford said.

When he said that, Deacon Turner's wife started crying and goin' on and I give her a hard look but she just went on. I was the one who loved Grandpa Jeremiah the most and she didn't hardly even know him so I didn't see why she was crying.

Everybody started tiptoeing around the house after that. They would go in and ask Grandpa Jeremiah if he was comfortable and stuff like that or take him some food or a cold glass of lemonade.

Sister Todd come over and stayed with us. Mostly what she did is make supper and do a lot of praying, which was good because I figured that
90 maybe God would do something to make Grandpa Jeremiah well. When she wasn't doing that she was piecing on³ a fancy quilt she was making for some white people in Wilmington.

Ellie, she went around asking everybody how they felt about Dr. Crawford and then she went into town and asked about the tests and things. Sister Jenkins asked her if she thought she knowed more than Dr. Crawford, and Ellie rolled her eyes at her, but Sister Jenkins was reading out her Bible and didn't make no notice of it.

Then Macon come over.

He had been away on what he called "a little piece of a job" and hadn't
100 heard how bad off Grandpa Jeremiah was. When he come over he talked

SOCIAL STUDIES CONNECTION



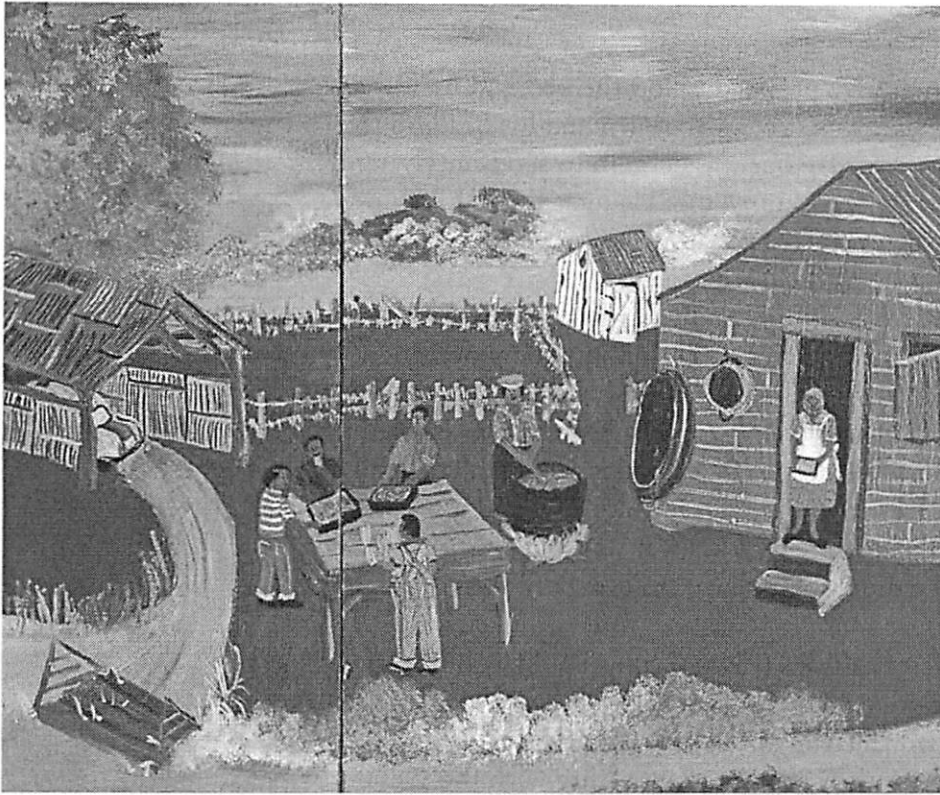
The type of music known as the Delta Blues originated in the Delta region of Mississippi. Musicians performed soulful songs accompanied only by a guitar or harmonica. This style of music soon spread across the country.

diagnosis (dī'æg-nō'sī's)
n. the identification of a disease through examination of a patient

condition (kən-dī'sh'ən)
n. a disease or state of health

2. **Deacon**: a term used for church members who assist their church's priest or minister.

3. **piecing on**: mending or adding blocks of fabric.



Detail of *Cookin Hog Cracklin* (1995), Jessie Coates. Acrylic on masonite. Private collection.
© Jessie Coates/SuperStock.

ANALYZE VISUALS

What can you **infer** about the people in this painting?

to Ellie and she told him what was going on and then he got him a soft drink from the refrigerator and sat out on the porch and before you know it he was crying. **D**

You could look at his face and tell the difference between him sweating and the tears. The sweat was close against his skin and shiny and the tears come down fatter and more sparkly. **E**

Macon sat on the porch, without saying a word, until the sun went down and the crickets started chirping and carrying on. Then he went in to where Grandpa Jeremiah was and stayed in there for a long time.

110 Sister Todd was saying that Grandpa Jeremiah needed his rest and Ellie went in to see what Macon was doing. Then she come out real mad.

“He got Grandpa telling those old stories again,” Ellie said. “I told him Grandpa needed his rest and for him not to be staying all night.”

He did leave soon, but bright and early the next morning Macon was back again. This time he brought his guitar with him and he went on in to Grandpa Jeremiah’s room. I went in, too.

Grandpa Jeremiah’s room smelled terrible. It was all closed up so no drafts could get on him and the whole room was smelled down with disinfect⁴ and

D MONITOR

Reread lines 88–103. In your chart, record how Sister Todd, Ellie, and Macon deal with Grandpa Jeremiah’s illness.

E STYLE

Reread lines 104–106. What **adjectives** does Myers use to create a vivid image of Macon?

4. **disinfect**: short for *disinfectant*, a chemical that destroys germs and bacteria.

medicine. Grandpa Jeremiah lay propped up on the bed and he was so
120 gray he looked scary. His hair wasn't combed down and his head on the
pillow with his white hair sticking out was enough to send me flying if
Macon hadn't been there. He was skinny, too. He looked like his skin got
loose on his bones, and when he lifted his arms, it hung down like he was
just wearing it instead of it being a part of him. **F**

Macon sat slant-shouldered with his guitar across his lap. He was
messin' with the guitar, not making any music, but just going over the
strings as Grandpa talked.

130 "Old Carrie went around out back to where they kept the pigs penned up
and she felt a cold wind across her face. . . ." Grandpa Jeremiah was telling
the story about how a old woman out-tricked the Devil and got her son
back. I had heard the story before, and I knew it was pretty scary. "When
she felt the cold breeze she didn't blink nary⁵ an eye, but looked straight
ahead. . . ."

All the time Grandpa Jeremiah was talking I could see Macon fingering
his guitar. I tried to imagine what it would be like if he was actually
plucking the strings. I tried to fix my mind on that because I didn't like
the way the story went with the old woman wrestling with the Devil.

We sat there for nearly all the afternoon until Ellie and Sister Todd
come in and said that supper was ready. Me and Macon went out and ate
140 some collard greens, ham hocks, and rice. Then Macon he went back in
and listened to some more of Grandpa's stories until it was time for him to
go home. I wasn't about to go in there and listen to no stories at night.

Dr. Crawford come around a few days later and said that Grandpa
Jeremiah was doing a little better.

"You think the Good Lord gonna pull him through?" Sister Todd asked.

"I don't tell the Good Lord what He should or should not be doing,"
Dr. Crawford said, looking over at Sister Todd and at Ellie. "I just said
that *my* patient seems to be doing okay for his condition."

"He been telling Macon all his stories," I said.

150 "Macon doesn't seem to understand that Grandpa Jeremiah needs his
strength," Ellie said. "Now that he's improving, we don't want him to have
a **setback**."

"No use in stopping him from telling his stories," Dr. Crawford said.
"If it makes him feel good it's as good as any medicine I can give him."

I saw that this didn't set with Ellie, and when Dr. Crawford had left
I asked her why.

"Dr. Crawford means well," she said, "but we have to get away from the
kind of life that keeps us in the past." **G**

F STYLE

Reread lines 122–124.
What words and phrases
does Myers use to create
a **precise description**
of how skinny Grandpa
Jeremiah is?

setback (sĕt'băk') *n.*
an unexpected stop in
progress; a change from
better to worse

G MONITOR

Reread lines 155–158.
What does Ellie mean
by her response to the
narrator's question?

5. *nary*: not one; not any.

She didn't say why we should be trying to get away from the stories and
160 I really didn't care too much. All I knew was that when Macon was sitting
in the room with Grandpa Jeremiah I wasn't nearly as scared as I used to
be when it was just me and Ellie listening. I told that to Macon.

"You getting to be a big man, that's all," he said.

That was true. Me and Macon was getting to be good friends, too. I didn't
even mind so much when he started being friends with Ellie later. It seemed
kind of natural, almost like Macon was supposed to be there with us instead
of just visiting.

Grandpa wasn't getting no better, but he wasn't getting no worse,
either.

170 "You liking Macon now?" I asked Ellie when we got to the middle of
July. She was dishing out a plate of smothered chops⁶ for him and I hadn't
even heard him ask for anything to eat.

"Macon's funny," Ellie said, not answering my question. "He's in there
listening to all of those old stories like he's really interested in them. It's
almost as if he and Grandpa Jeremiah are talking about something more
than the stories, a secret language."

I didn't think I was supposed to say anything about that to Macon, but
once, when Ellie, Sister Todd, and Macon were out on the porch shelling
butter beans after Grandpa got tired and was resting, I went into his room
180 and told him what Ellie had said.

"She said that?" Grandpa Jeremiah's face was skinny and old looking
but his eyes looked like a baby's, they was so bright. **H**

"Right there in the kitchen is where she said it," I said. "And I don't
know what it mean but I was wondering about it."

"I didn't think she had any feeling for them stories," Grandpa Jeremiah
said. "If she think we talking secrets, maybe she don't."

"I think she getting a feeling for Macon," I said.

"That's okay, too," Grandpa Jeremiah said. "They both young."

"Yeah, but them stories you be telling, Grandpa, they about old people
190 who lived a long time ago," I said.

"Well, those the folks you got to know about," Grandpa Jeremiah said.
"You think on what those folks been through, and what they was feeling,
and you add it up with what you been through and what you been feeling,
then you got you something."

"What you got Grandpa?"

"You got you a bridge," Grandpa said. "And a meaning. Then when
things get so hard you about to break, you can sneak across that bridge
and see some folks who went before you and see how they didn't break. **I**

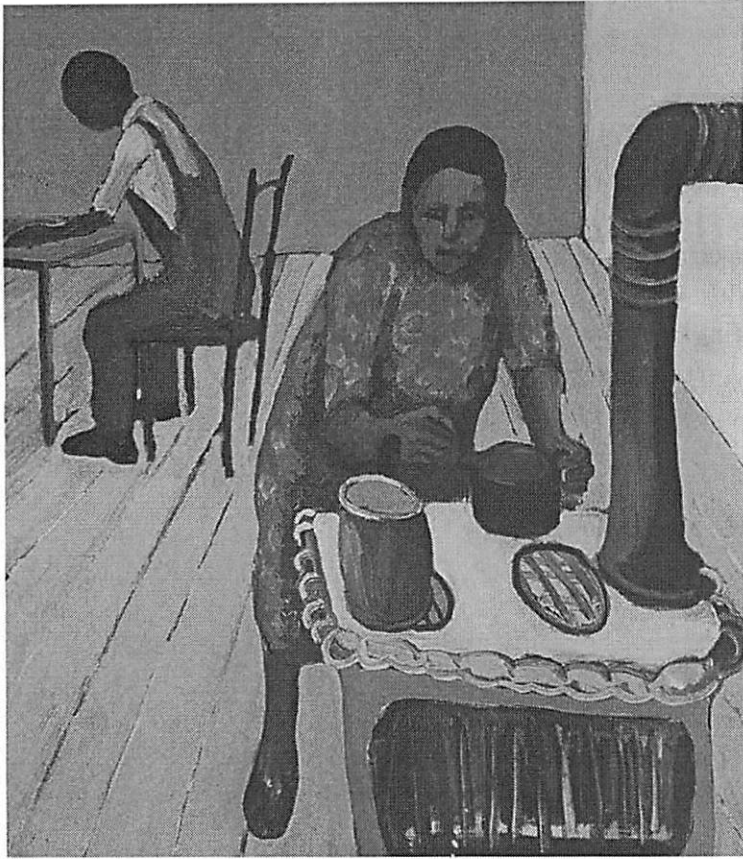
H STYLE

Consider Myers's **word choice** to describe Grandpa Jeremiah's eyes. Why is this an unusual comparison?

I MONITOR

Reread lines 189–198. Why are the stories important to Grandpa Jeremiah? Add this information to your chart.

6. **smothered chops:** pork chops thickly covered with a sauce or gravy.



The Poverty of It All (1965), Benny Andrews. Oil and collage on canvas, 26" × 22".
Courtesy of ACA Galleries, New York. © Benny Andrews.

ANALYZE VISUALS
What do the colors in this picture suggest about how the people are feeling?

Some got bent and some got twisted and a few fell along the way, but they didn't break."

"Am I going to break, Grandpa?"

"You? As strong as you is?" Grandpa Jeremiah pushed himself up on his elbow and give me a look. "No way you going to break, boy. You gonna be strong as they come. One day you gonna tell all them stories I told you to your young'uns and they'll be as strong as you."

"Suppose I ain't got no stories, can I make some up?"

"Sure you can, boy. You make 'em up and twist 'em around. Don't make no mind. Long as you got 'em."

"Is that what Macon is doing?" I asked. "Making up stories to play on his guitar?"

"He'll do with 'em what he see fit, I suppose," Grandpa Jeremiah said. "Can't ask more than that from a man." ❶

It rained the first three days of August. It wasn't a hard rain but it rained anyway. The mailman said it was good for the crops over East but I didn't care about that so I didn't pay him no mind. What I did mind was when it rain like that the field mice come in and get in things like the flour bin and I always got the blame for leaving it open.

When the rain stopped I was pretty glad. Macon come over and sat with Grandpa and had something to eat with us. Sister Todd come over, too.

❶ **STYLE**
Reread lines 201–212. What do you learn through the **dialogue** about how Grandpa Jeremiah views stories?

220 “How Grandpa doing?” Sister Todd asked. “They been asking about him in the church.”

“He’s doing all right,” Ellie said.

“He’s kind of quiet today,” Macon said. “He was just talking about how the hogs needed breeding.”

“He must have run out of stories to tell,” Sister Todd said. “He’ll be repeating on himself like my father used to do. That’s the way I *hear* old folks get.”

Everybody laughed at that because Sister Todd was pretty old, too. Maybe we was all happy because the sun was out after so much rain.

230 When Sister Todd went in to take Grandpa Jeremiah a plate of potato salad with no mayonnaise like he liked it, she told him about how people was asking for him and he told her to tell them he was doing okay and to remember him in their prayers.

Sister Todd came over the next afternoon, too, with some rhubarb pie with cheese on it, which is my favorite pie. When she took a piece into Grandpa Jeremiah’s room she come right out again and told Ellie to go fetch the Bible.

It was a hot day when they had the funeral. Mostly everybody was there. The church was hot as anything, even though they had the window
240 open. Some yellowjacks flew in and buzzed around Sister Todd’s niece and then around Deacon Turner’s wife and settled right on her hat and stayed there until we all stood and sang “Soon-a Will Be Done.”

At the graveyard Macon played “Precious Lord” and I cried hard even though I told myself that I wasn’t going to cry the way Ellie and Sister Todd was, but it was such a sad thing when we left and Grandpa Jeremiah was still out to the grave that I couldn’t help it.

During the funeral and all, Macon kind of told everybody where to go and where to sit and which of the three cars to ride in. After it was over he come by the house and sat on the front porch and played on his guitar.
250 Ellie was standing leaning against the rail and she was crying but it wasn’t a hard crying. It was a soft crying, the kind that last inside of you for a long time. **K**

Macon was playing a tune I hadn’t heard before. I thought it might have been what he was working at when Grandpa Jeremiah was telling him those stories and I watched his fingers but I couldn’t tell if it was or not. It wasn’t nothing special, that tune Macon was playing, maybe halfway between them Delta Blues he would do when Sister Todd wasn’t around and something you would play at church. It was something different and something the same at the same time. I watched his fingers go over that
260 guitar and figured I could learn that tune one day if I had a mind to. **R**

K **STYLE**

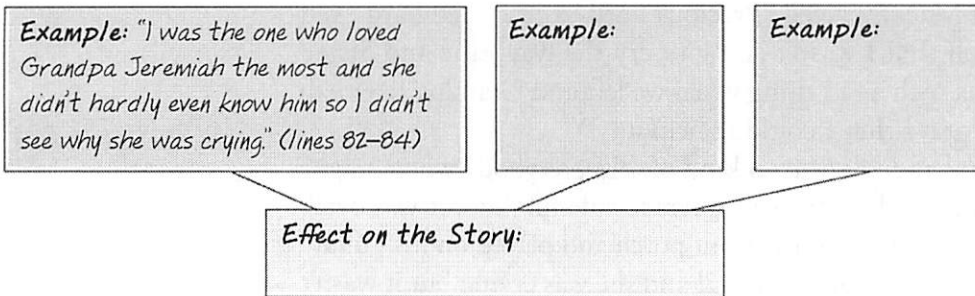
Evaluate how Myers’s use of a child narrator affects the type of details you get about the funeral. What observations does the narrator make that an adult might not have made?

Comprehension

- Recall** Which members of the community take an interest in Grandpa Jeremiah's health?
- Clarify** The narrator describes a younger Macon in lines 44–55. How has Macon changed?
- Summarize** What evidence is there that Ellie begins to like Macon?

Literary Analysis

- Monitor** Review the chart you created as you read. Choose three entries and explain what clues helped you **clarify** the information.
- Make Inferences** By the end of the story, which characters do you think **treasure** Grandpa Jeremiah's stories?
- Identify Mood** The feeling that a piece of literature creates for the reader is called the mood. What words would you use to describe the overall mood of "Jeremiah's Song"? Support your response by noting specific places in the text that create this feeling.
- Analyze Style** Recall that Myers's **first-person narrator** in this story is a child. Find three examples of narration that seem especially typical of how a child might tell a story. Record them in a diagram like the one shown. How does the choice of a child narrator affect the story?



- Evaluate** Do you think "Jeremiah's Song" is an appropriate title for the story? Use examples from the selection to support your opinion.

Extension and Challenge

- SOCIAL STUDIES CONNECTION** Research Macon's favorite music—the Delta Blues—and the musicians who made it famous. Focus your search on one musician, such as Muddy Waters, Robert Johnson, Son House, or Charley Patton. Share your findings with the class.



RESEARCH LINKS

For more on Delta Blues musicians, visit the Research Center at ClassZone.com.



R3.5 Identify the speaker and recognize the difference between **first-** and **third-person narration** (e.g., autobiography compared with biography).



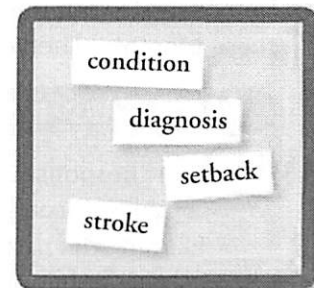
Muddy Waters

Vocabulary in Context

VOCABULARY PRACTICE

Show that you understand the vocabulary words by deciding whether each statement is true or false.

1. You usually get a **diagnosis** from a doctor.
2. A **setback** during a long project is very exciting.
3. Having a heart **condition** means that you have strong feelings.
4. After having a **stroke**, you might not be able to speak as clearly.



VOCABULARY IN WRITING

Suppose Jeremiah invented a story of his experiences after having a stroke. What might he have said? Write Jeremiah's story using at least two vocabulary words. You might begin like this.

EXAMPLE SENTENCE

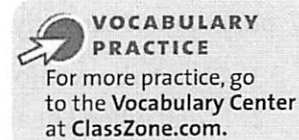
*Before this **setback**, I was as fit and healthy as a young man.*

VOCABULARY STRATEGY: COMPOUND WORDS

When two or more words are combined to have one meaning, they are called **compound words**. You can understand some compound words, like *firefighter*, by looking at the meanings of the combined words. For others, like the vocabulary word *setback*, you may need help from context clues or a dictionary to fully understand the meaning of the word.

PRACTICE Use context clues to figure out the meaning of each boldfaced compound word. Then write the definition. Use a dictionary if necessary.

1. It was the first time he had broken a rule, so we chose to **overlook** it.
2. She tries to pay closer attention to things, but she is still a **scatterbrain**.
3. As the **ringleader** of the neighborhood baseball team, he was responsible for gathering the players and setting the rules.
4. I became good friends with the **shopkeeper** who sold used books.
5. Once the cottage was fixed up, it was a lovely **getaway** from busy city life.



Reading-Writing Connection

Demonstrate your understanding of “Jeremiah’s Song” by responding to these prompts. Then complete the **Grammar and Writing** exercise.



WRITING PROMPTS

A. Short Response: Analyze a Character

Consider Macon’s relationship with Jeremiah, Ellie, and the narrator. In **one paragraph**, summarize how Macon becomes part of the family. Include at least one reason why you think he **treasures** Jeremiah’s stories.

B. Extended Response: Rewrite a Scene

The narrator describes Grandpa Jeremiah’s funeral in lines 238–260 the way he sees it. In a **narrative or personal letter**, rewrite the funeral scene as Ellie sees it.

SELF-CHECK

A strong analysis will . . .

- show an understanding of Macon’s character
- use specific details and events from the story to support your ideas

A successful response will . . .

- include possible details not mentioned by the story’s narrator
- keep Ellie’s character traits in mind

GRAMMAR AND WRITING

USE CORRECT SENTENCE TYPE In order for your sentences to communicate the meaning and emotions you intend, it is important to use the correct sentence type. A **declarative** sentence makes a statement and ends with a period. An **interrogative** sentence asks a question and ends with a question mark. An **imperative** sentence makes a request or gives a command and usually ends with a period. An **exclamatory** sentence shows strong feeling and ends with an exclamation point.

PRACTICE Identify the sentence type for each of the following sentences and punctuate it correctly.

1. Oh, what a comfort that is to me
2. I cried when I heard Macon play the guitar
3. Ladies, please sit down
4. What song is Macon playing on the porch

For more help with sentence types, see page R60 in the **Grammar Handbook**.



LC1.1. Use simple, compound, and compound-complex sentences; use effective coordination and subordination of ideas to express complete thoughts.