

Before You Read

The War of the Wall

Connect to the Short Story

Think about the neighborhood around your home or school. Does any part of your neighborhood have a special meaning for you?

List Make a list of places in your neighborhood that you like or that are special to you. Think about why the places are special and how you would explain their importance to someone who does not live in your neighborhood.

Build Background

In this story, a woman puzzles the people of a neighborhood by painting a picture on the blank wall of a building. It is the same wall on which the narrator and a cousin had carved the name of a friend who had died in the Vietnam War.

- Painting murals, or large paintings on walls or ceilings, is a tradition that goes back to the earliest humans.
- Many public murals tell stories or show familiar scenes, activities, and characters from the surrounding community.
- About 58,000 Americans died serving in the Vietnam War, which lasted from 1965 to 1973.

Vocabulary

whiff (hwif) *n.* a quick puff or gust, especially of air, odor, or smoke (p. 513). *They noticed a whiff of fried chicken as they passed the restaurant.*

satchel (sach'əl) *n.* a carrying bag, often having a shoulder strap (p. 513). *She carried her school books in a blue satchel.*

aromas (ə rō' mæz) *n.* pleasing smells or scents (p. 513). *As the pie baked, the aromas of cinnamon and apples filled the house.*

inscription (in skrip' shən) *n.* something written or carved on a surface as a lasting record (p. 520). *The inscription on the locket said "To my daughter."*

Meet Toni Cade Bambara



Civil Rights Activist Toni Cade Bambara was born in New York City. She lived, studied, and wrote in New York, France, and Italy. In addition to writing, Bambara was a civil rights activist who was especially interested in improving living conditions in U.S. cities. Her books include *Gorilla, My Love*, a short-story collection, and *The Salt Eaters*, a novel.

Toni Cade Bambara was born in 1939 and died in 1995.



Literature Online

Author Search For more about Toni Cade Bambara, go to glencoe.com and enter QuickPass code GL29763u4.

Set Purposes for Reading

BQ BIG Question

As you read, ask yourself, how can art influence a community and its members?

Literary Element Characterization

Characterization includes all the methods that a writer uses to develop the personality of a character. Sometimes the narrator tells readers directly what a character is like. This is called **direct characterization**. Other times, readers learn about what a character is like through the character's words and actions and through what other characters say or think about the character. This is called **indirect characterization**.

Characterization is important because it makes characters seem real and believable. When you pay attention to details of characterization, you will deepen your understanding of the characters.

As you read, ask yourself, what does the narrator tell me about each character? How does each character's actions and words reveal his or her personality?

Reading Strategy Visualize

When you **visualize**, you create images, or pictures, in your mind. As you read, you use the author's descriptions and details to visualize the characters, setting, and events.

Visualizing helps you understand and enjoy what you read. It helps you "see" people, places, and things. Visualizing as you read also helps you remember the details of the story more clearly. To visualize as you read, focus on vivid details. Try to imagine the action of the story unfolding before you.

As you read, list vivid details. Then sketch what they help you "see" in your mind. Use a graphic organizer like the one below.

Details

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Sketch



Learning Objectives

For pages 510–523

In studying this text, you will focus on the following objectives:

Literary Study: Analyzing characterization.

Reading: Visualizing.

TRY IT

Visualize Think of a place that you know well. Describe this place to a partner using as many descriptive details as you can. Ask your partner to sketch the place from your description. Did your details allow your partner to correctly visualize and sketch the location? What other details could you have given to make the picture clearer? Then reverse roles, and try to visualize and sketch your partner's location.

THE WAR OF THE WALL

Toni Cade Bambara

Me and Lou had no time for courtesies.¹ We were late for school. So we just flat out told the painter lady to quit messing with the wall. It was our wall, and she had no right coming into our neighborhood painting on it. Stirring in the paint bucket and not even looking at us, she mumbled something about Mr. Eubanks, the barber, giving her permission. That had nothing to do with it as far as we were concerned. We've been pitching pennies against that wall since we were little kids. Old folks have been dragging their chairs out to sit in the shade of the wall for years. Big kids have been playing handball against the wall since so-called integration when the crazies 'cross town poured cement in our pool so we couldn't use it. I'd sprained my neck one time boosting my cousin Lou up to chisel Jimmy Lyons's name into the wall when we found out he was never coming home from the war in Vietnam to take us fishing.

¹ *Courtesies* are the words and actions of polite behavior.

Characterization What do you learn about the narrator and Lou in this paragraph? How is the information presented to you?

"If you lean close," Lou said, leaning hipshot against her beat-up car, "you'll get a **whiff** of bubble gum and kids' sweat. And that'll tell you something—that this wall belongs to the kids of Taliaferro Street." I thought Lou sounded very convincing. But the painter lady paid us no mind. She just snapped the brim of her straw hat down and hauled her bucket up the ladder.

"You're not even from around here," I hollered up after her. The license plates on her old piece of car said "New York." Lou dragged me away because I was about to grab hold of that ladder and shake it. And then we'd really be late for school.

When we came from school, the wall was slick with white. The painter lady was running string across the wall and taping it here and there. Me and Lou leaned against the gumball machine outside the pool hall and watched. She had strings up and down and back and forth. Then she began chalking them with a hunk of blue chalk.

The Morris twins crossed the street, hanging back at the curb next to the beat-up car. The twin with the red ribbons was hugging a jug of cloudy lemonade. The one with yellow ribbons was holding a plate of dinner away from her dress. The painter lady began snapping the strings. The blue chalk dust measured off halves and quarters up and down and sideways too. Lou was about to say how hip it all was, but I dropped my book **satchel** on his toes to remind him we were at war.

Some good **aromas** were drifting our way from the plate leaking pot likker² onto the Morris girl's white socks. I could tell from where I stood that under the tinfoil was baked ham, collard greens, and candied yams. And knowing Mrs. Morris, who sometimes bakes for my mama's restaurant, a slab of buttered cornbread was

2 **Pot likker** (or "pot liquor") is the juices that come from collard greens and ham when they are cooked.

Vocabulary

whiff (hwif) *n.* a quick puff or gust, especially of air, odor, or smoke

satchel (sach'əl) *n.* a carrying bag, often having a shoulder strap

aromas (ə rō' məz) *n.* pleasing smells or scents

Visualize How does the author help you visualize the scene?

probably up under there too, sopping up some of the pot likker. Me and Lou rolled our eyes, wishing somebody would send us some dinner. But the painter lady didn't even turn around. She was pulling the strings down and prying bits of tape loose.

Side Pocket came strolling out of the pool hall to see what Lou and me were studying so hard. He gave the painter lady the once-over, checking out her paint-spattered jeans, her chalky T-shirt, her floppy-brimmed straw hat. He hitched up his pants and glided over toward the painter lady, who kept right on with what she was doing.

"Whatcha got there, sweetheart?" he asked the twin with the plate.

"Suppah," she said all soft and countrylike.

"For her," the one with the jug added, jerking her chin toward the painter lady's back.

Still she didn't turn around. She was rearing back on her heels, her hands jammed into her back pockets, her face squinched up like the masterpiece she had in mind was taking shape on the wall by magic. We could have been gophers crawled up into a rotten hollow for all she cared. She didn't even say hello to anybody. Lou was muttering something about how great her concentration was. I butt him with my hip, and his elbow slid off the gum machine.

"Good evening," Side Pocket said in his best ain't-I-fine voice. But the painter lady was moving from the milk crate to the step stool to the ladder, moving up and down fast, scribbling all over the wall like a crazy person. We looked at Side Pocket. He looked at the twins. The twins looked at us. The painter lady was giving a show. It was like those old-timey music movies where the dancer taps on the tabletop and then starts jumping all over the furniture, kicking chairs over and not skipping a beat. She didn't even look where she was stepping. And for a minute there, hanging on the ladder to reach a far spot, she looked like she was going to tip right over.

"Ahh," Side Pocket cleared his throat and moved fast to catch the ladder. "These young ladies here have brought you some supper."

Characterization What do you learn about Side Pocket from the narrator's description of the sound of his voice?

Visualize To whom is the painter compared in this paragraph? How does this comparison help you visualize the scene?

"Ma'am?" The twins stepped forward. Finally the painter turned around, her eyes "full of sky," as my grandmama would say. Then she stepped down like she was in a trance.³ She wiped her hands on her jeans as the Morris twins offered up the plate and the jug. She rolled back the tinfoil, then wagged her head as though something terrible was on the plate.

"Thank your mother very much," she said, sounding like her mouth was full of sky too. "I've brought my own dinner along." And then, without even excusing herself, she went back up the ladder, drawing on the wall in a wild way. Side Pocket whistled one of those oh-brother breathy whistles and went back into the pool hall. The Morris twins shifted their weight from one foot to the other, then crossed the street and went home. Lou had to drag me away, I was so mad. We couldn't wait to get to the firehouse to tell my daddy all about this rude woman who'd stolen our wall.

All the way back to the block to help my mama out at the restaurant, me and Lou kept asking my daddy for ways to run the painter lady out of town. But my daddy was busy talking about the trip to the country and telling Lou he could come too because Grandmama can always use an extra pair of hands on the farm.

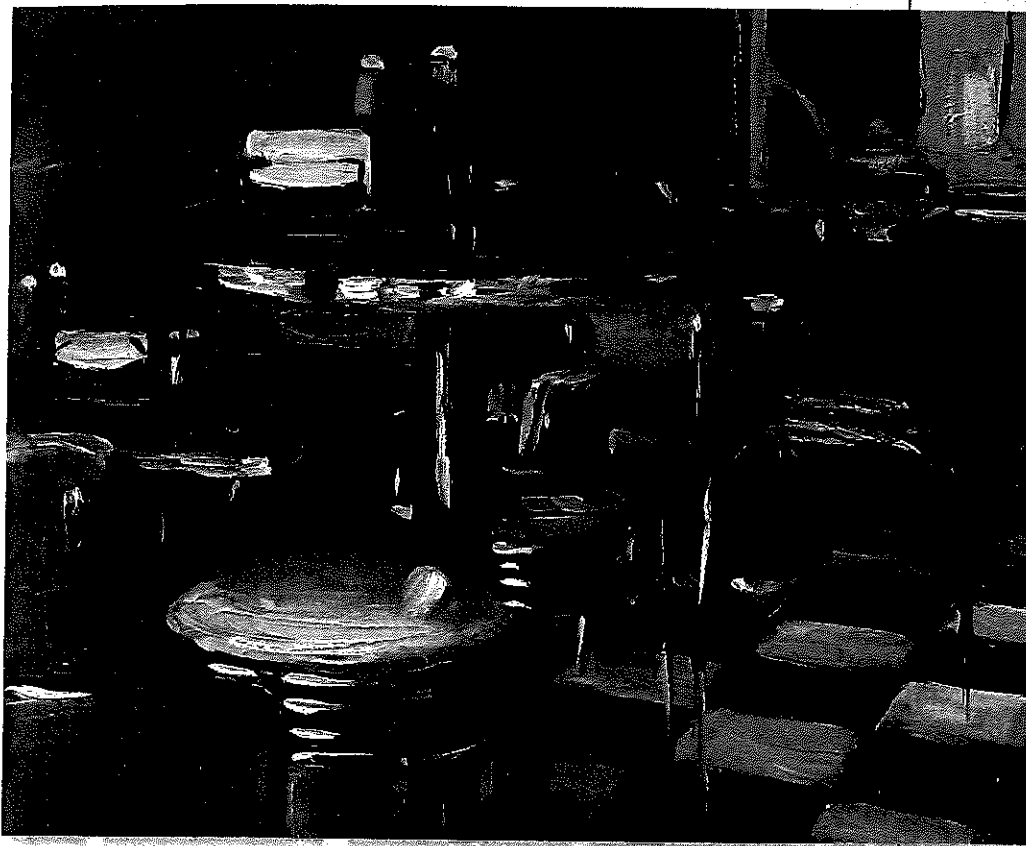
Later that night, while me and Lou were in the back doing our chores, we found out that the painter lady was a liar. She came into the restaurant and leaned against the glass of the steam table, talking about how starved she was. I was scrubbing pots and Lou was chopping onions, but we could hear her through the service window. She was asking Mama was that a ham hock in the greens, and was that a neck bone in the pole beans, and were there any vegetables cooked without meat, especially pork.

"I don't care who your spiritual leader is," Mama said in that way of hers. "If you eat in the community, sistuh, you gonna eat pig by-and-by, one way or t'other."

Me and Lou were cracking up in the kitchen, and several customers at the counter were clearing their

³ To be in a **trance** means that someone is in a state of mind between sleeping and waking; the person is in a daze.

Characterization How does the narrator feel about the painter?



Hamburger Joint. Pam Ingalls.

throats, waiting for Mama to really fix her wagon⁴ for not speaking to the elders when she came in. The painter lady took a stool at the counter and went right on with her questions. Was there cheese in the baked macaroni, she wanted to know? Were there eggs in the salad? Was it honey or sugar in the iced tea? Mama was fixing Pop Johnson's plate. And every time the painter lady asked a fool question, Mama would dump another spoonful of rice on the pile. She was tapping her foot and heating up in a dangerous way. But Pop Johnson was happy as he could be. Me and Lou peeked through the service window, wondering what planet the painter lady came from. Who ever heard of baked macaroni without cheese, or potato salad without eggs?

⁴ To *fix her wagon* means "to put her in her place or show her who's boss."

"Do you have any bread made with unbleached flour?"⁵ the painter lady asked Mama. There was a long pause, as though everybody in the restaurant was holding their breath, wondering if Mama would dump the next spoonful on the painter lady's head. She didn't. But when she set Pop Johnson's plate down, it came down with a bang.

When Mama finally took her order, the starving lady all of a sudden couldn't make up her mind whether she wanted a vegetable plate or fish and a salad. She finally settled on the broiled trout and a tossed salad. But just when Mama reached for a plate to serve her, the painter lady leaned over the counter with her finger all up in the air.

"Excuse me," she said. "One more thing." Mama was holding the plate like a Frisbee, tapping that foot, one hand on her hip. "Can I get raw beets in that tossed salad?"

"You will get," Mama said, leaning her face close to the painter lady's, "whatever Lou back there tossed. Now sit down." And the painter lady sat back down on her stool and shut right up.

All the way to the country, me and Lou tried to get Mama to open fire on the painter lady. But Mama said that seeing as how she was from the North, you couldn't expect her to have any manners. Then Mama said she was sorry she'd been so impatient with the woman because she seemed like a decent person and was simply trying to stick to a very strict diet. Me and Lou didn't want to hear that. Who did that lady think she was, coming into our neighborhood and taking over our wall?

"Welllllll," Mama drawled, pulling into the filling station so Daddy could take the wheel, "it's hard on an artist, ya know. They can't always get people to look at their work. So she's just doing her work in the open, that's all."

Me and Lou definitely did not want to hear that. Why couldn't she set up an **easel** downtown or draw on the sidewalk in her own neighborhood? Mama told us to quit fussing so much; she was tired and wanted to rest. She climbed into the back seat and dropped down into the warm hollow Daddy had made in the pillow.

⁵ **Unbleached flour** does not have chemicals added to make it white.

Characterization What do you learn about Mama through her conversation with the painter?

Visual Vocabulary

An **easel** is a frame used to support an artist's canvas or paper while he or she works.



All weekend long, me and Lou tried to scheme up ways to recapture our wall. Daddy and Mama said they were sick of hearing about it. Grandmama turned up the TV to drown us out. On the late news was a story about the New York subways. When a train came roaring into the station all covered from top to bottom, windows too, with writings and drawings done with spray paint, me and Lou slapped five. Mama said it was too bad kids in New York had nothing better to do than spray paint all over the trains. Daddy said that in the cities, even grown-ups wrote all over the trains and buildings too. Daddy called it "graffiti." Grandmama called it a shame.

We couldn't wait to get out of school on Monday. We couldn't find any black spray paint anywhere. But in a junky hardware store downtown we found a can of white epoxy paint, the kind you touch up old refrigerators with when they get splotchy and peely. We spent our whole allowance on it. And because it was too late to use our bus passes, we had to walk all the way home lugging our book satchels and gym shoes, and the bag with the epoxy.

When we reached the corner of Taliaferro and Fifth, it looked like a block party or something. Half the neighborhood was gathered on the sidewalk in front of the wall. I looked at Lou, he looked at me. We both looked at the bag with the epoxy and wondered how we were going to work our scheme. The painter lady's car was nowhere in sight. But there were too many people standing around to do anything. Side Pocket and his buddies were leaning on their cue sticks, hunching each other. Daddy was there with a lineman⁶ he catches a ride with on Mondays. Mrs. Morris had her arms flung around the shoulders of the twins on either side of her. Mama was talking with some of her customers, many of them with napkins still at the throat. Mr. Eubanks came out of the barbershop, followed by a man in a striped poncho, half his face shaved, the other half full of foam.

BQ **BIG Question**

What do the narrator's and Lou's actions show about how important the wall is to them?

⁶ A worker who strings telephone lines is a *lineman*.

"She really did it, didn't she?" Mr. Eubanks huffed out his chest. Lots of folks answered right quick that she surely did when they saw the straight razor in his hand.

Mama beckoned⁷ us over. And then we saw it. The wall. Reds, greens, figures outlined in black. Swirls of purple and orange. Storms of blues and yellows. It was something. I recognized some of the faces right off. There was Martin Luther King, Jr. And there was a man with glasses on and his mouth open like he was laying down a heavy rap. Daddy came up alongside and reminded us that that was Minister Malcolm X. The serious woman with a rifle I knew was Harriet Tubman because my grandmama has pictures of her all over the house. And I knew Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer 'cause a signed photograph of her hangs in the restaurant next to the calendar.

Then I let my eyes follow what looked like a vine. It trailed past a man with a horn, a woman with a big white flower in her hair, a handsome dude in a tuxedo seated at a piano, and a man with a goatee holding a book. When I looked more closely, I realized that what had looked like flowers were really faces. One face with yellow petals looked just like Frieda Morris. One with red petals looked just like Hattie Morris. I could hardly believe my eyes.

"Notice," Side Pocket said, stepping close to the wall with his cue stick like a classroom pointer. "These are the flags of liberation," he said in a voice I'd never heard him use before. We all stepped closer while he pointed and spoke. "Red, black and green," he said, his pointer falling on the leaflike flags of the vine. "Our liberation⁸ flag. And here Ghana, there Tanzania. Guinea-Bissau, Angola, Mozambique." Side Pocket sounded very tall, as though he'd been waiting all his life to give this lesson.

Mama tapped us on the shoulder and pointed to a high section of the wall. There was a fierce-looking man with his arms crossed against his chest guarding a bunch of children. His muscles bulged, and he looked a lot like my

Characterization Who is Mr. Eubanks talking about? What do his words and actions say about what he thinks of the person?

⁷ If you **beckoned** to someone, you called or signaled to him or her, usually with a wave or a nod.

⁸ **Liberation** is freedom achieved after a struggle. The names listed are of countries in Africa.

daddy. One kid was looking at a row of books. Lou hunched⁹ me 'cause the kid looked like me. The one that looked like Lou was spinning a globe on the tip of his finger like a basketball. There were other kids there with microscopes and compasses. And the more I looked, the more it looked like the fierce man was not so much guarding the kids as defending their right to do what they were doing.

Then Lou gasped and dropped the paint bag and ran forward, running his hands over a rainbow. He had to tiptoe and stretch to do it, it was so high. I couldn't breathe either. The painter lady had found the chisel marks and had painted Jimmy Lyons's name in a rainbow.

"Read the **inscription**, honey," Mrs. Morris said, urging little Frieda forward. She didn't have to urge much. Frieda marched right up, bent down, and in a loud voice that made everybody quit oohing and ahing and listen, she read,

*To the People of Taliaferro Street
I Dedicate This Wall of Respect
Painted in Memory of My Cousin
Jimmy Lyons*

⁹ When Lou **hunched** the narrator, he nudged or bumped into the narrator on purpose.

Vocabulary

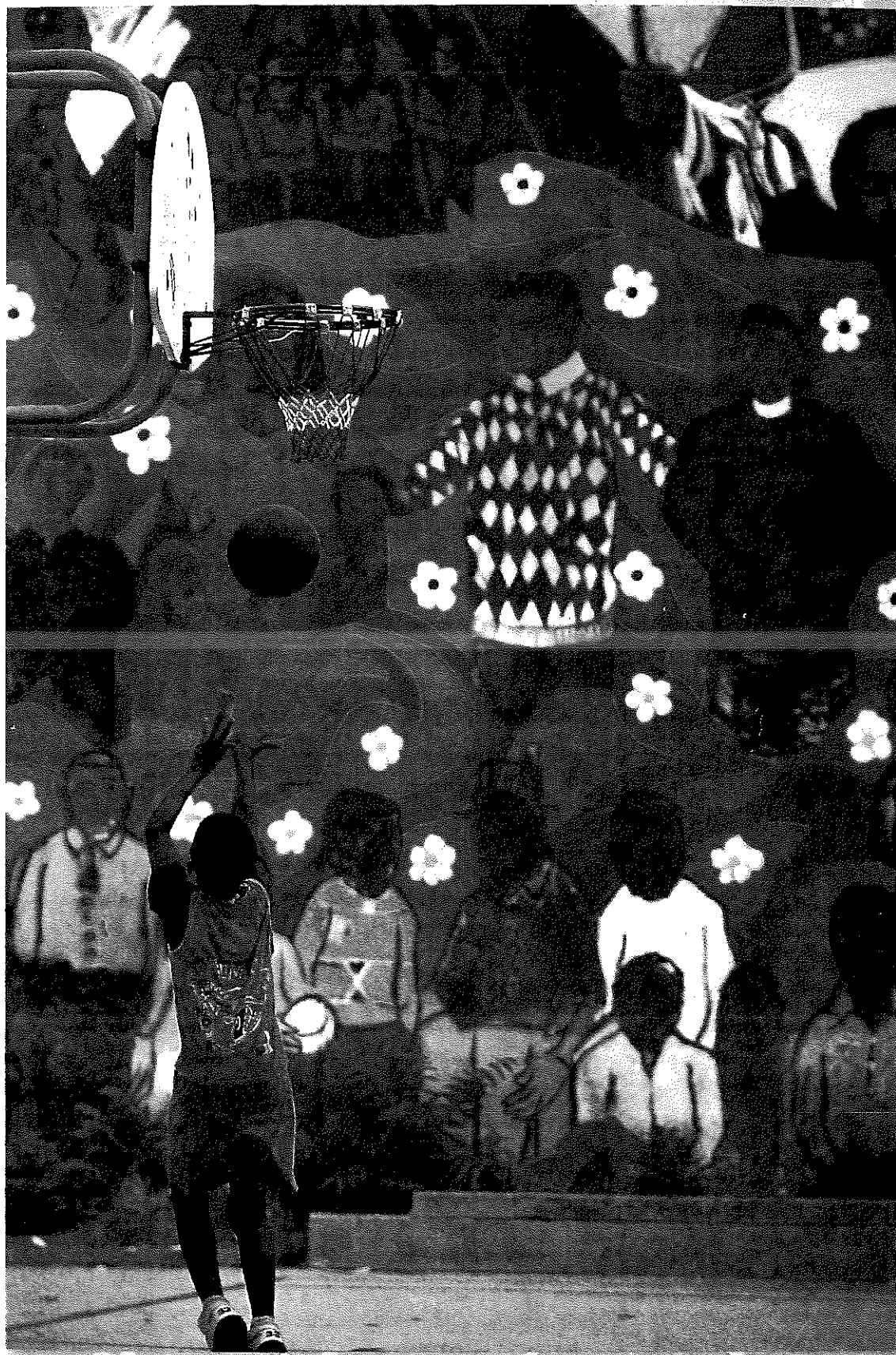
inscription (in skrip'shən) *n.* something written or carved on a surface as a lasting record

Visualize How does picturing the mural in your mind add to your understanding of the story?

BQ BIG Question

How does the narrator's reaction show the narrator's feelings about the wall?

View the Photograph How is the mural in the photo similar to or different than the mural you visualized as you read the story?



After You Read

Respond and Think Critically

1. What do the Morris twins bring to the artist? [Recall]
2. What happens when the painter tries to order food in the restaurant? Explain. [Summarize]
3. Do Lou's feelings about the painter change during the story? Use details from the story to support your answer. [Interpret]
4. What do you think the narrator feels after reading the inscription? Explain. [Infer]
5. What do you think of the way the painter behaves? Use details from the story to support your answer. [Evaluate]
6. **BQ** **BIG Question** Were the narrator and the painter influenced in the same way by the death of Jimmy Lyons in the Vietnam War? Explain. [Compare]

Vocabulary Practice

On a separate sheet of paper, write the vocabulary word that correctly completes each sentence. If none of the words fits the sentence, write "none."

whiff satchel aromas inscription

1. Kelly filled her _____ with newspapers to deliver on her route.
2. Before he closed the door, we got a(n) _____ of cold winter air in the room.
3. Tonya made a(n) _____ of a horse and a cow with her new paints.
4. The _____ on the statue lists the names of local residents who fought in World War I.
5. I like the _____ colors of your painting in the hall.
6. On my birthday, the house was filled with the _____ of my favorite dishes.

Academic Vocabulary

The mural's spectacular color and figures show the artist's **creativity**. In the preceding sentence, *creativity* means "the ability to make something from skills and imagination." Think about something you like to do that involves skill and imagination. How do you show your own creativity?

TIP

Evaluating

When you evaluate something, you form an opinion or make a judgment about it. To answer question 5, think about the different examples of the painter's words and actions in the story, as well as the ways in which other characters react to her words and actions. Think about why the artist behaves as she does.

- Consider how the artist's actions and words are different from those of others in the neighborhood.
- Think of the artist's conversation with the Morris twins. She tells them she has her own dinner. What does this exchange tell you about the artist?



Keep track of your ideas about the **BIG Question** in your unit Foldable.



Literature Online

Selection Resources

For Selection Quizzes, eFlashcards, and Reading-Writing Connection activities, go to glencoe.com and enter QuickPass code GL29763u4.

Literary Element Characterization

1. Based on the narrator's description of the painting, in what way does the narrator change after viewing the painting? Explain.

Review: Motivation

As you learned on page 433, **motivation** is what makes characters act as they do. To understand a character's motivation, ask why the character speaks or acts as he or she does.

Test Skills Practice

2. Which detail from "The War of the Wall" best explains why the painter created the mural on the wall?
 - A The people of the neighborhood had damaged the wall.
 - B No one will look at the artist's other paintings.
 - C Many boys write on the wall with spray paint.
 - D The painter wants people to remember Jimmy Lyons.

Reading Strategy Visualize

3. What are some details the writer gives to help the reader visualize the characters in "The War of the Wall"? To help you answer, refer to the graphic organizer you created as you read.
4. List details that describe the mural that the artist paints on Taliaferro Street. Then sketch a picture of the mural.

Grammar Link

Compound Subjects and Predicates A **compound subject** is made up of two or more subjects that are joined by *and*, *or*, or *nor*. For example:

Frieda, Hattie, and Side Pocket looked.

The subjects *Frieda*, *Hattie*, and *Side Pocket* are joined by *and*. The compound subject is "Frieda, Hattie, and Side Pocket."

Neither Mama nor Daddy listened.

The subjects are *Mama* and *Daddy*; they are joined by *nor*. The compound subject is "Neither Mama nor Daddy."

A **compound predicate** is made up of two or more verbs that have the same subject and that are joined by *and*, *or*, or *nor*.

The painter taped string and moved up.

The verbs *taped* and *moved* both go with the subject *painter*. The compound predicate is *taped and moved*.

Side Pocket talks to the twins, watches the painter, and holds the ladder.

The verbs *talks*, *watches*, and *holds* go with the subject *Side Pocket*. The compound predicate is *talks, watches, and holds*.

Practice Look for two sentences in the story with compound subjects or predicates. Then write a sentence of your own that has a compound subject and a sentence that has a compound predicate.

Write with Style

Apply Imagery Use imagery, or description that appeals to the senses, to describe a piece of art that you like. The artwork may be in your classroom, at home, or in a book. While you write, think about or look at the artwork and describe as many details as you can. Make sure that your reader will be able to visualize the artwork just by reading your description.