

## COMPARING CHARACTERS

As you study your pair of texts, you will deepen your knowledge of the ways that authors use a range of conventions in order to create their characters. Using *Year of Wonders* and *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, this unit will help you to develop your ability to explain and analyse the commonalities and contrasts between characters, and how characterisation assists in the understanding of key ideas, issues and themes within the texts.



### ***Year of Wonders* and *Girl with a Pearl Earring*: background**

Anna Frith is the narrator and protagonist of *Year of Wonders*. As a 20-year-old mother, she learns everything she can to fight the Plague that has overtaken the town. She has a brief affair with an Anglican Minister, Michael Mompellion, but rejects him after discovering the truth behind his marriage with Elinor, a close friend with whom Anna has fought the Plague. Eventually, Anna is forced to leave England and settles on the coast of North Africa.

Griet, a 16-year-old girl is the central character in *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. Following the death of her father, Griet is forced to work as a maid in the house of the painter, Johannes Vermeer. Vermeer's wealthy patron, van Ruijven, asks for a painting of Griet. Vermeer asks Griet to wear his wife's pearl earring. When Vermeer's wife, Catharina, discovers that Griet has been wearing her earring and has been painted by her husband, Griet is forced to leave the house.



'Girl with a Pearl Earring' by the 17th-century Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer, was the inspiration for Tracy Chevalier's historical novel.

The following extracts use the characters of Anna and Griet to explore the idea that hardship prompts growth, maturity and wisdom. Note the similarities indicated by the highlighted text in each extract.

### **Extract 1: *Year of Wonders***

She closed her eyes for a moment and then opened them and gazed at me. 'I wonder if you know how you have changed. It is the one good, perhaps, to come out of this terrible year. Oh, the spark was clear in you when you first came to me – but you covered your light as if you were afraid of what would happen if anybody saw it. You were like a flame blown by the wind until it is almost extinguished. All I had to do was put the glass around you. And now, how you shine!'

Geraldine Brooks, *Year of Wonders*, p. 235

### **Extract 2: *Girl with a Pearl Earring***

'You see, you've grown used to stained fingers as you got used to the flies', he liked to say. 'Now you know the world a little better you can see that there's no reason to always keep your hands clean. They just get dirty again. Cleanliness is not as important as you thought back when you were a maid, eh?' Sometimes, though, I crushed lavender and hid it under my chemise to mask the smell of meat that seemed to hang about me even when I was far from the Meat Hall. There were many things I'd had to get used to.

I changed into another dress, a clean apron, and a newly starched cap. I still wore my cap in the same way, and I probably looked as much as I had the day I first set out to work as a maid. Only now my eyes were not so wide and innocent.

Tracy Chevalier, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, p. 239

## YOUR TURN

25.1 Read Extracts 3 and 4 below. As you read them, consider points of commonality (similarities) and divergence (differences). Then complete the activities that follow.

### Extract 3: *Year of Wonders*

'How do we tumble down a hill? A foot placed incautiously on an unsteady rock or loosened turf, an ankle twisted or a knee buckled, and of a sudden we are gone, our body lost to our own control until we find ourselves sprawled in indignity at the bottom. So it seems apt indeed to speak of the fall. For sin, too, must always start with but a single misstep, and suddenly we are hurtling towards some uncertain stopping point. All that is sure in the descent is that we will arrive sullied and bruised and unable to regain our former place without hard effort ...

[A conversation between Minister Mompellion and Anna:]

'No!' I interrupted, but he let go of one wrist and placed a finger on my lips.

'I am not myself. As you know, better than anyone. You have seen how I am, these last months. I don't know how to explain it, it is beyond any words that I have to describe. But it is as if there is a tempest in my mind, I cannot see through the murk of it. I cannot think clearly – indeed, much of the time I cannot think at all. There is only a weight in my heart, a formless dread that shapes itself into pain. And then a greater dread of more pain ...'

I barely heard his words. I know he did not want me to do what I next did. But desire was so strong within me that I did not care.

Geraldine Brooks, *Year of Wonders*, p. 276

### Extract 4: *Girl with a Pearl Earring*

He looked down at the paint, the palette knife moving again. I think I smiled a little. 'I want you to wear the earring.'

'But you know what will happen then, sir.'

'I know the painting will be complete.'

You will ruin me, I thought. Again I could not bring myself to say it. 'What will your wife say when she sees the finished painting?' I asked instead, as boldly as I dared.

'She will not see it. I will give it directly to van Ruijven.' It was the first time he had admitted he was painting me secretly, that Catharina would disapprove.

'You need only wear it once,' he added, as if to placate me. 'The next time I paint you I will bring it. Next week. Catharina will not miss it for an afternoon.'

'But sir,' I said, 'my ear is not pierced.'

He frowned slightly. 'Well then, you will need to take care of that.' This was clearly a woman's detail, not something he felt he needed to concern himself with. He tapped the knife and wiped it with a rag. 'Now, let us begin. Chin down a bit.' He gazed at me. 'Lick your lips, Griet.'

I licked my lips.

'Leave your mouth open.'

I was so surprised by this request that my mouth remained open of its own will. I blinked back tears. Virtuous women did not open their mouths in paintings.'

Tracy Chevalier, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, pp. 209–10



- a In the table below, compare how Anna and Griet choose to respond to the situation in which they find themselves.

ANNA	GRIET

- b Complete the following sentences with reference to the differences evident in the extracts 3 and 4.

\_\_\_\_\_ is \_\_\_\_\_, while \_\_\_\_\_  
is \_\_\_\_\_

While \_\_\_\_\_ shows \_\_\_\_\_,  
\_\_\_\_\_ exhibits \_\_\_\_\_ during the  
incident in which \_\_\_\_\_

On the one hand, \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_. On the other hand, \_\_\_\_\_

- c Fill in the gaps in the paragraph below to compare Anna and Griet.

Both Chevalier and Brooks explore the concept of choice. Chevalier demonstrates this idea in Griet, who \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_. Similarly, Brooks explores it in the character of Anna, who \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_. However, the ways in which these characters choose to  
respond to demanding circumstances differ. Anna, led by her desire for Mompellion, is active in her  
choice to \_\_\_\_\_; whereas Griet, beaten by Vermeer's power, has  
far less control over her destiny; she is forced to \_\_\_\_\_. Clearly,  
the extracts present a similar central idea within the texts; that is, there are varying degrees to which  
people, especially young women, can choose their fate.

- d Complete this activity off the page. Write two paragraphs that respond to this topic, using TEEL (see Unit 4) to structure your response.

Compare Anna from *Year of Wonders* and Griet from *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. To what extent are both women compromised by the choices they make?