Ta-Na-E-Ka by Mary Whitebird

LITERARY FOCUS: CHARACTER AND CONFLICT
A character is a person (or animal or monster or other being) in a story. Like people in real life, story characters have qualities, such as kindness or wisdom. What happens in a story depends on the way its characters respond to conflict.

Put simply, a conflict is a battle or struggle. A struggle between a character and an outside force, such as a competitor or a natural disaster, is an external conflict. A struggle within a character's mind or heart, such as a struggle with anxiety, distrust, or anger, is an internal conflict. Characters often face both kinds of conflict.

READING SKILLS: COMPARISON AND CONTRAST
Without even realizing it, you probably compare and contrast things every day. For example, do you compare and contrast pop music stars when you watch music videos? Do you compare and contrast styles of clothing or haircuts?
- When you compare, you look for ways in which things are alike.
- When you contrast, you look for ways in which things are different.

As you read “Ta-Na-E-Ka,” compare and contrast its characters and how they respond to the challenges they face. Use the compare-and-contrast sidenotes throughout the selection to guide you.
VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT

PREVIEW SELECTION VOCABULARY

Learn these words before you read "Ta-Na-E-Ka."

loftiest (lōf’tē-əst) adj.: noblest; highest.

Grandfather described endurance as the loftiest virtue.

gorging (gōr’jīn) v.: filling up; stuffing.

During his Ta-Na-E-Ka the boy dreamed of gorging himself on hamburgers.

shrewdest (shrōd’est) adj. used as n.: sharpest; most clever.

Only the shrewdest could survive Ta-Na-E-Ka.

audacity (ə-das’ə-tē) n.: boldness; daring.

Mary’s parents were shocked at her audacity.

grimaced (grim’ist) v.: twisted the face to express pain, anger, or disgust.

Roger grimaced at the thought of eating grasshoppers.

CLARIFYING WORD MEANINGS: RESTATEMENT

When you come across an unfamiliar word in your reading, what do you do? Do you skip over it? Do you raise your hand and ask your teacher for help? Do you crack open a dictionary? One great way to figure out the meaning of an unfamiliar word is to search for nearby context clues. Context clues are words and phrases that appear near the unfamiliar word and that may help you define it. Here are some examples of context clues:

DEFINITION: Her audacity, or boldness, was known throughout the school.

RESTATEMENT: She had the audacity—she actually had the nerve—to ask for a full refund.

EXAMPLE: She has a lot of audacity. She walked right up and demanded her money back.

CONTRAST: Unlike her sister, who is very timid and shy, Mary has audacity.
TA-NA-E-KA
Mary Whitebird

BACKGROUND: Literature and Social Studies
This story has to do with the traditions of the Native Americans known as the Kaw. The Kaw are also known as the Kansa. Both names are forms of a word that means “People of the South Wind.” The Kaw originally lived along the Kansas River.

As my birthday drew closer, I had awful nightmares about it. I was reaching the age at which all Kaw Indians had to participate in Ta-Na-E-Ka. Well, not all Kaws. Many of the younger families on the reservation were beginning to give up the old customs. But my grandfather, Amos Deer Leg, was devoted to tradition. He still wore handmade beaded moccasins instead of shoes and kept his iron-gray hair in tight braids. He could speak English, but he spoke it only with white men. With his family he used a Sioux dialect.¹

Grandfather was one of the last living Indians (he died in 1953, when he was eighty-one) who actually fought against the U.S. Cavalry. Not only did he fight, he was wounded in a skirmish at Rose Creek—a famous encounter in which the celebrated Kaw chief Flat Nose lost his life. At the time, my grandfather was only eleven years old.

¹. Sioux (sōo) dialect: one of the languages spoken by the Plains Indians, including the Kaw.
Eleven was a magic word among the Kaws. It was the time of Ta-Na-E-Ka, the “flowering of adulthood.” It was the age, my grandfather informed us hundreds of times, “when a boy could prove himself to be a warrior and a girl took the first steps to womanhood.”

“I don’t want to be a warrior,” my cousin, Roger Deer Leg, confided to me. “I’m going to become an accountant.”

“None of the other tribes make girls go through the endurance ritual,” I complained to my mother.

“It won’t be as bad as you think, Mary,” my mother said, ignoring my protests. “Once you’ve gone through it, you’ll certainly never forget it. You’ll be proud.”

I even complained to my teacher, Mrs. Richardson, feeling that, as a white woman, she would side with me. She didn’t. “All of us have rituals of one kind or another,” Mrs. Richardson said. “And look at it this way: How many girls have the opportunity to compete on equal terms with boys? Don’t look down on your heritage.”

Heritage, indeed! I had no intention of living on a reservation for the rest of my life. I was a good student. I loved school. My fantasies were about knights in armor and fair
ladies in flowing gowns being saved from dragons. It never
once occurred to me that being an Indian was exciting.

But I’ve always thought that the Kaw were the origina-
tors of the women’s liberation movement. No other Indian
tribe—and I’ve spent half a lifetime researching the sub-
ject—treated women more “equally” than the Kaw. Unlike
most of the subtribes of the Sioux Nation, the Kaw allowed
men and women to eat together. And hundreds of years
before we were “acculturated,” a Kaw woman had the right
to refuse a prospective husband even if her father arranged
the match.

The wisest women (generally wisdom was equated
with age) often sat in tribal councils. Furthermore, most
Kaw legends revolve around “Good Woman,” a kind of
supersquaw, a Joan of Arc of the high plains. Good
Woman led Kaw warriors into battle after battle, from
which they always seemed to emerge victorious.

And girls as well as boys were required to undergo
Ta-Na-E-Ka.

The actual ceremony varied from tribe to tribe, but
since the Indians’ life on the plains was dedicated to sur-
vival, Ta-Na-E-Ka was a test of survival.

“Endurance is the loftiest virtue of the Indian,” my
grandfather explained. “To survive, we must endure. When
I was a boy, Ta-Na-E-Ka was more than the mere symbol it
is now. We were painted white with the juice of a sacred herb
and sent naked into the wilderness without so much as a
knife. We couldn’t return until the white had worn off. It
wouldn’t wash off. It took almost eighteen days, and during
that time we had to stay alive, trapping food, eating insects

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2. acculturated (ə-kəl′char-ə-təd) v. used as adj.: adapted to a new or
different culture.
3. Joan of Arc (1412–1431): French heroine who led her country’s army
to victory over the English in 1429.
and roots and berries, and watching out for enemies. And we did have enemies—both the white soldiers and the Omaha warriors, who were always trying to capture Kaw boys and girls undergoing their endurance test. It was an exciting time.”

“What happened if you couldn’t make it?” Roger asked. He was born only three days after I was, and we were being trained for Ta-Na-E-Ka together. I was happy to know he was frightened, too.

“Many didn’t return,” Grandfather said. “Only the strongest and shrewdest. Mothers were not allowed to weep over those who didn’t return. If a Kaw couldn’t survive, he or she wasn’t worth weeping over. It was our way.”

“What a lot of hooey,” Roger whispered. “I’d give anything to get out of it.”

“I don’t see how we have any choice,” I replied.

Roger gave my arm a little squeeze. “Well, it’s only five days.”

Five days! Maybe it was better than being painted white and sent out naked for eighteen days. But not much better.

We were to be sent, barefoot and in bathing suits, into the woods. Even our very traditional parents put their foot down when Grandfather suggested we go naked. For five days we’d have to live off the land, keeping warm as best we could, getting food where we could. It was May, but on the northernmost reaches of the Missouri River, the days were still chilly and the nights were fiercely cold.

Grandfather was in charge of the month’s training for Ta-Na-E-Ka. One day he caught a grasshopper and demonstrated how to pull its legs and wings off in one flick of the fingers and how to swallow it.

I knew one thing. This particular Kaw Indian girl wasn’t going to swallow a grasshopper no matter how hungry she got. And then I had an idea. Why hadn’t I thought of it before? It would have saved nights of bad dreams about squooshy grasshoppers.

I headed straight for my teacher’s house. “Mrs. Richardson,” I said, “would you lend me five dollars?”

“Five dollars!” she exclaimed. “What for?”

“You remember the ceremony I talked about?”

“Ta-Na-E-Ka. Of course. Your parents have written me and asked me to excuse you from school so you can participate in it.”

“Well, I need some things for the ceremony,” I replied, in a half-truth. “I don’t want to ask my parents for the money.”

“It’s not a crime to borrow money, Mary. But how can you pay it back?”

“I’ll baby-sit for you ten times.”

“That’s more than fair,” she said, going to her purse and handing me a crisp, new five-dollar bill. I’d never had that much money at once.

“I’m happy to know the money’s going to be put to a good use,” Mrs. Richardson said.

A few days later the ritual began with a long speech from my grandfather about how we had reached the age of decision, how we now had to fend for ourselves and prove that we could survive the most horrendous of ordeals. All the friends and relatives who had gathered at our house for dinner made jokes about their own Ta-Na-E-Ka experiences. They all advised us to fill up now, since for the next five
days we’d be gorging ourselves on crickets. Neither Roger nor I was very hungry. “I’ll probably laugh about this when I’m an accountant,” Roger said, trembling.

“Are you trembling?” I asked.

“What do you think?”

“I’m happy to know boys tremble, too,” I said.

At six the next morning, we kissed our parents and went off to the woods. “Which side do you want?” Roger asked. According to the rules, Roger and I would stake out “territories” in separate areas of the woods, and we weren’t to communicate during the entire ordeal.

“I’ll go toward the river, if it’s OK with you,” I said.

“Sure,” Roger answered. “What difference does it make?”

To me, it made a lot of difference. There was a marina a few miles up the river, and there were boats moored there. At least, I hoped so. I figured that a boat was a better place to sleep than under a pile of leaves.

“Why do you keep holding your head?” Roger asked.

“Oh, nothing. Just nervous,” I told him. Actually, I was afraid I’d lose the five-dollar bill, which I had tucked into my hair with a bobby pin. As we came to a fork in the trail, Roger shook my hand. “Good luck, Mary.”

“N’ko-n’ta,” I said. It was the Kaw word for “courage.”

The sun was shining and it was warm, but my bare feet began to hurt immediately. I spied one of the berry bushes Grandfather had told us about. “You’re lucky,” he had said. “The berries are ripe in the spring, and they are delicious and nourishing.” They were orange and fat, and I popped one into my mouth.

Argh! I spat it out. It was awful and bitter, and even grasshoppers were probably better tasting, although I never intended to find out.
Pause at line 170. How has Mary overcome her fear?

I sat down to rest my feet. A rabbit hopped out from under the berry bush. He nuzzled the berry I'd spat out and ate it. He picked another one and ate that, too. He liked them. He looked at me, twitching his nose. I watched a redheaded woodpecker bore into an elm tree, and I caught a glimpse of a civet cat waddling through some twigs. All of a sudden I realized I was no longer frightened. Ta-Na-E-Ka might be more fun than I'd anticipated. I got up and headed toward the marina.

"Not one boat," I said to myself dejectedly. But the restaurant on the shore, Ernie's Riverside, was open. I walked in, feeling silly in my bathing suit. The man at the counter was big and tough-looking. He wore a sweat shirt with the words "Fort Sheridan, 1944," and he had only three fingers on one of his hands. He asked me what I wanted.

"A hamburger and a milkshake," I said, holding the five-dollar bill in my hand so he'd know I had money.

4. civet (siv/it) cat n.: furry spotted skunk.
“That’s a pretty heavy breakfast, honey,” he murmured.

“That’s what I always have for breakfast,” I lied.

“Forty-five cents,” he said, bringing me the food. (Back in 1947, hamburgers were twenty-five cents and milkshakes were twenty cents.)


While I was eating, I had a grand idea. Why not sleep in the restaurant? I went to the ladies’ room and made sure the window was unlocked. Then I went back outside and played along the riverbank, watching the water birds and trying to identify each one. I planned to look for a beaver dam the next day.

The restaurant closed at sunset, and I watched the three-fingered man drive away. Then I climbed in the unlocked window. There was a night light on, so I didn’t turn on any lights. But there was a radio on the counter. I turned it on to a music program. It was warm in the restaurant, and I was hungry. I helped myself to a glass of milk and a piece of pie, intending to keep a list of what I’d eaten so I could leave money. I also planned to get up early, sneak out through the window, and head for the woods before the three-fingered man returned. I turned off the radio, wrapped myself in the man’s apron, and in spite of the hardness of the floor, fell asleep.

“What the heck are you doing here, kid?”

It was the man’s voice.

It was morning. I’d overslept. I was scared.

“Hold it, kid. I just wanna know what you’re doing here. You lost? You must be from the reservation. Your folks must be worried sick about you. Do they have a phone?”
“Yes, yes,” I answered. “But don’t call them.”
I was shivering. The man, who told me his name was Ernie, made me a cup of hot chocolate while I explained about Ta-Na-E-Ka.

“Darnedest thing I ever heard,” he said, when I was through. “Lived next to the reservation all my life and this is the first I’ve heard of Ta-Na-whatever-you-call-it.” He looked at me, all goose bumps in my bathing suit. “Pretty silly thing to do to a kid,” he muttered.

That was just what I’d been thinking for months, but when Ernie said it, I became angry. “No, it isn’t silly. It’s a custom of the Kaw. We’ve been doing this for hundreds of years. My mother and my grandfather and everybody in my family went through this ceremony. It’s why the Kaw are great warriors.”

“OK, great warrior,” Ernie chuckled, “suit yourself. And, if you want to stick around, it’s OK with me.” Ernie went to the broom closet and tossed me a bundle. “That’s the lost-and-found closet,” he said. “Stuff people left on boats. Maybe there’s something to keep you warm.”

The sweater fitted loosely, but it felt good. I felt good. And I’d found a new friend. Most important, I was surviving Ta-Na-E-Ka.

My grandfather had said the experience would be filled with adventure, and I was having my fill. And Grandfather had never said we couldn’t accept hospitality.

I stayed at Ernie’s Riverside for the entire period. In the mornings I went into the woods and watched the animals and picked flowers for each of the tables in Ernie’s. I had never felt better. I was up early enough to watch the sun rise on the Missouri, and I went to bed after it set. I ate everything I wanted—insisting that Ernie take all my money.
for the food. "I'll keep this in trust for you, Mary," Ernie promised, "in case you are ever desperate for five dollars." (He did, too, but that's another story.)

I was sorry when the five days were over. I'd enjoyed every minute with Ernie. He taught me how to make western omelets and to make Chili Ernie Style (still one of my favorite dishes). And I told Ernie all about the legends of the Kaw. I hadn't realized I knew so much about my people.

But Ta-ña-e-ka was over, and as I approached my house at about nine-thirty in the evening, I became nervous all over again. What if Grandfather asked me about the berries and the grasshoppers? And my feet were hardly cut. I hadn't lost a pound and my hair was combed.

"They'll be so happy to see me," I told myself hopefully, "that they won't ask too many questions."

I opened the door. My grandfather was in the front room. He was wearing the ceremonial beaded deerskin shirt which had belonged to his grandfather. "N'g'da'ma," he said. "Welcome back."

I embraced my parents warmly, letting go only when I saw my cousin Roger sprawled on the couch. His eyes were red and swollen. He'd lost weight. His feet were an unsightly mass of blood and blisters, and he was moaning: "I made it, see. I made it. I'm a warrior. A warrior."

My grandfather looked at me strangely. I was clean, obviously well-fed, and radiantly healthy. My parents got the message. My uncle and aunt gazed at me with hostility.

Finally my grandfather asked, "What did you eat to keep you so well?"

I sucked in my breath and blurted out the truth: "Hamburgers and milkshakes."

"Hamburgers!" my grandfather growled.

"Milkshakes!" Roger moaned.
"You didn’t say we had to eat grasshoppers," I said sheepishly.

"Tell us all about your Ta-Na-E-Ka," my grandfather commanded.

I told them everything, from borrowing the five dollars, to Ernie’s kindness, to observing the beaver.

"That’s not what I trained you for," my grandfather said sadly.

I stood up. "Grandfather, I learned that Ta-Na-E-Ka is important. I didn’t think so during training. I was scared stiff of it. I handled it my way. And I learned I had nothing to be afraid of. There's no reason in 1947 to eat grasshoppers when you can eat a hamburger."

I was inwardly shocked at my own audacity. But I liked it. "Grandfather, I'll bet you never ate one of those rotten berries yourself."

Grandfather laughed! He laughed aloud! My mother and father and aunt and uncle were all dumbfounded. Grandfather never laughed. Never.

"Those berries—they are terrible," Grandfather admitted. "I could never swallow them. I found a dead deer on the
first day of my Ta-Na-E-Ka—shot by a soldier, probably—and he kept my belly full for the entire period of the test!”

Grandfather stopped laughing. “We should send you out again,” he said.

I looked at Roger. “You’re pretty smart, Mary,” Roger groaned. “I’d never have thought of what you did.”

“Accountants just have to be good at arithmetic,” I said comforting. “I’m terrible at arithmetic.”

Roger tried to smile but couldn’t. My grandfather called me to him. “You should have done what your cousin did. But I think you are more alert to what is happening to our people today than we are. I think you would have passed the test under any circumstances, in any time. Somehow, you know how to exist in a world that wasn’t made for Indians. I don’t think you’re going to have any trouble surviving.”

Grandfather wasn’t entirely right. But I’ll tell about that another time.
Skills Review

Ta-Na-E-Ka

VOCABULARY AND COMPREHENSION

A. Clarifying Word Meanings: Context Clues Fill in each blank with the correct Word Bank word. Then, underline the context clues that helped you.

1. Last time we saw Mary, she was ________________ on popcorn, eating a whole bag of it.

2. She ________________ in pain when she cut her heel on a rock.

3. Never one to back down, her ________________ helped her survive the tough situation.

4. If the lowest quality a person can have is cowardice, then the ________________ quality must be courage.

5. That girl always finds clever solutions to hard problems. She is probably the ________________ person I know.

B. Reading Comprehension Write T or F next to each statement to tell whether it is true or false.

_____ 1. Mary is eleven years old.

_____ 2. Mary must go through an endurance ritual.

_____ 3. Mary is excited about the ritual.

_____ 4. Mary obeys the rules of the ritual.

_____ 5. Mary’s grandfather thinks that Mary failed the test.

Word Bank
loftiest
shrewdest
grimaced
gorging
audacity
VOCABULARY FOR "Ta-Na-E-Ka" by Mary Whitebird

loftiest- adj- noblest, or highest

shrewd- adj- clever, sharp

grimaced- verb- twisted the face to express pain or anger, or disgust

gorging verb- filling up, stuffing

audacity noun- bold courage, daring

heritage noun- something acquired or carried down from the past

dialect noun- a type of style of a language

ritual noun- a ceremonial act often repeated

reservation noun- land designated for Native Americans given by the US government

murmured noun- mumbled in an often complaining or angry way

acculturated verb- to have undergone a change influenced by a new culture

endurance noun- quality of lasting or withstanding stress or difficulties
Ta-Na-E-Ka,

Analyze Literature: Conflict

Conflict is a struggle between two forces in a literary work. Conflict is an important element of plot and provides both interest and suspense in a story.

There are two major divisions of conflict: internal and external. An internal conflict takes place within a character and usually involves a struggle of values, loyalties, and moral choices. In other words, a character is considering choices and their consequences before he or she must make some sort of decision. This type of conflict is known as person vs. self. An external conflict takes place between two characters (person vs. person), between a character and the values of society (person vs. society), between a character and nature (person vs. nature), and between a character and an outside force (person vs. fate).

As you are reading “Ta-Na-E-Ka,” determine what types of conflict are occurring in the story. Fill in the graphic organizer below with the examples that you find. The first one has been completed for you.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Internal Conflict</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person vs. self</td>
<td>• Mary struggles with two choices: respecting her tribe's tradition of Ta-Na-E-Ka and the wishes of her family, or trying to avoid the ritual altogether.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Type</td>
<td>Examples</td>
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<tr>
<td>Person vs. person</td>
<td>Mary and her mother clash over Mary's participation in Te-Na-E-Ka.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Person vs. society</td>
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<tr>
<td>Person vs. nature</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Ta-Na-E-Ka,

**Analyze Literature: Characterization**

A *character* is an individual that takes part in the action of a literary work. To make a character interesting to readers, the author of a story tries to create a character that has several character traits, much like a real person. This type of character is called a *round character*.

As you are reading "Ta-Na-E-Ka," fill in examples from the story that prove that Mary has that particular character trait.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character Trait</th>
<th>Proof from the Story</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Stubborn</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Proud</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Clever</td>
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<td>4. Bold</td>
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<td>5. Nervous</td>
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</table>
"Ta-Na-E-Ka"

A. Number the following events in the correct sequence.

1. Roger and Mary decide that Mary will go off by herself in the direction of the river.
2. Mary defends the Kaw custom when Ernie says Ta-Na-E-Ka is silly.
3. Grandfather describes the rituals of Ta-Na-E-Ka he followed when he was a boy.
4. Mary promises to baby-sit for her teacher ten times in return for five dollars.
5. Mary meets Ernie at the restaurant.
6. Mary and Roger return home.
7. Ernie teaches Mary how to cook chili.
8. Grandfather tells Mary that he thinks she would have passed the survival test under any circumstances.
9. Grandfather shows Mary and Roger how to eat a grasshopper.

B. Character Traits Using Cause and Effect

Complete the cause-and-effect chart to see how the characters’ traits influence the plot.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Cause</th>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>Traits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>She has to do Ta-Na-E-Ka, but she doesn’t want to eat berries and live off the land.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Roger</td>
<td>He has to do Ta-Na-E-Ka, so he forces himself to go through with it as he thinks he must.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ernie</td>
<td></td>
<td>He gives her food and shelter.</td>
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