

ENGLISH LITERATURE AND COMPOSITION

SECTION II

Total time—2 hours

Question 1 (1991)

(suggested time—40 minutes. This question counts as one-third of the total essay score.)

Read the following poem by Emily Dickinson. Then write an essay in which you describe the speaker's attitude toward the woman's death. Using specific references to the text, show how the use of language reveals the speaker's attitude.

The last Night that She lived
It was a Common Night
Except the Dying -- this to Us
Made Nature different.

We noticed smallest things -- (5)
Things overlooked before
By this great light upon our Minds
Italicized -- as 'twere

As We went out and in
Between Her final Room (10)
And Rooms where Those to be alive
Tomorrow were, a Blame

That Others could exist
While She must finish quite
A Jealousy for Her arose (15)
So nearly infinite--

We waited while She passed --
It was a narrow time --
Too jostled were Our Souls to speak
At length the notice came. (20)

She mentioned, and forgot --
Then lightly as a Reed
Bent to the Water, struggled scarce --
Consented, and was dead --

And We -- We placed the Hair -- (25)
And drew the Head erect --
And then an awful leisure was
Belief to regulate --

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Question 1 (1991)

General Directions : *This scoring guide will be useful for most of the essays you read, but cases in which it seems inadequate, consult your Table Leader. The score you assign should reflect your judgment of the quality of the essay as a whole. Reward the writers for what they do well. The score for an exceptionally well-written essay may be raised by one point from the score otherwise appropriate. In no case may a poorly written essay be scored higher than a 3.*

8-9 - These well-written essays demonstrate an awareness of the complexity of the speaker's attitude toward the woman's death. Using apt and specific reference to the text, they effectively analyze how the use of language (such as word choice, metaphor, simile, imagery, syntax, rhyme, ambiguity) reveals this attitude. These papers need not be without flaws, but they will be characterized by an understanding of the poem and consistent control over the elements of effective writing. They demonstrate the writer's ability to read with perception and to express ideas with clarity.

6-7 - These essays present a plausible interpretation of the speaker's attitude toward the woman's death, and with specific references to the text, analyze how the use of language reveals this attitude. They are, however, less precise, less thorough, or less convincing than the best papers. They may contain minor flaws in interpretation and will probably deal with fewer elements of style than the 8-9 papers. These essays demonstrate the writer's ability to express ideas clearly, but with less maturity and control than the top papers.

5 - These essays attempt to answer the question, but they do so superficially or unconvincingly. The definition of the speaker's attitude may be oversimplified or vague and the analysis of language may be cursory or lacking appropriate examples. The writing is adequate to convey the writer's thoughts but these essays are typically pedestrian, not as well conceived, organized, or developed as upper half papers.

3-4 - These essays respond to the question incompletely. Their discussion of the speaker's attitude may be limited and/or erroneous; they may not analyze the language in the poem. They may reveal a lack of understanding of the poem and/or the use of language in the poem. The writing demonstrates weak control over the elements of composition. These essays typically contain recurrent stylistic flaws or misreadings and lack persuasive evidence from the text.

1-2 - These papers fail to respond adequately to the question. They may be confused by the poem and significantly misrepresent the speaker's attitude; they may omit a discussion of the use of language entirely. Generally these essays are unacceptably brief or poorly written on several counts. Although some attempt to answer the question may have been made, the writer's views typically are presented with little clarity, organization, or supporting evidence.

0 - This score is for off-topic responses.

= - Indicates a blank response

Essay A

The fear of death is not uncommon. It festers inside all of us, increasing with no great dispatch, yet becoming ever more present as we add years to our lives. Emily Dickinson's poem explores the nature of death, and why it is sometimes more frightening to be left behind than to do die. With carefully selected adjectives and actions, Dickinson reveals the uncertainties which accompany the death of someone close.

The poem begins and concludes with calm, sandwiching the turbulent feelings and unpleasant waiting contained in the middle five stanzas. Dickinson's contrast between the "Common Night" and "Except the Dying" proposes that the event of the death was somehow enlightening, not an ordinary event. Something was to change in those who experienced it, as the "smallest things" were noticed, as well as things "overlooked" in the usual course of daily events.

In the next two stanzas (3 and 4), the author presents two clearly defined feelings: Blame and Jealousy. She explores blame by carefully separating those who were alive and could continue to exist and "she" who would not. The choice of the adjective "infinite" to describe the Jealousy indicates the tenacity of this feeling. Such feelings of jealousy from the fourth stanza permeate the next, as the loved ones of the dying woman endure waiting. The contrast between the reality of a short period of time and the antithetical feelings of those who must wait is expressed in the phrases "narrow time" and "at length the notice came" (ll 18 and 20).

As the poem progresses, Dickinson provides a beautiful image of the woman's death. Her use of the simile, "lightly as a Reed" verifies the woman did not die in pain. Instead, perhaps her soul consented to death and exited her body, leaving behind an empty shell. It seems, then, the death of the woman was easier than the pain left behind for those survivors to endure. Such an attitude is present throughout the entire piece, as Dickinson provides clear distinctions between the "We" and "Us" versus the "She." It was "We - We" who were left to place the hair (L 25), not "she" who had passed on.

The death of the woman and the experience of those who endured it is not unlike something every human being must at one time face. With a simple, consistent tone, Dickinson provides not only an account of death, but great insight into the feelings of those who must remain.

Essay C

Ms Dickinson reveals in "The last Night that She lived ..." an attitude of jealousy toward the living at the death which she describes. She expresses the pain of loss, the sorrow, in her grief through word choices and by capitalizing initial letters of important words in each stanza.

In the first stanza, she contrasts this night with any other by using an upper-case "N." Although, as she admits, "It was a Common Night," the "Dying" was excepted. "... this to Us/Made Nature different," meaning that all present in the society of bereavement could sense the difference of this night as opposed to any other.

The second stanza suggests that the dying lady had been important to each person, for each person was in attendance, however, "We noticed smallest things - / Things overlooked before." Details of this woman's character were now important, more important than they had been in life. Perhaps the narrator wishes that these characteristics had been better explored before it had become too late.

With the third and fourth stanza, the jealousy arises. As the people visiting the dying lady walk from the room, they pass the rooms "where Those to be alive / Tomorrow were," and "a Jealousy for her arose." By observing the others around themselves, the bereaved found it unfair that they were to suffer such a loss and the friends and relatives of these others would not.

The death was described in stanzas five and six. She gave in to death easily - "lightly as a Reed / Bent to the Water, struggled scarce -- / Consented, and was dead." When this news at length came to those who waited, "Too jostled were Our Souls to speak." They felt the grief, the sense of loss, and were speechless in it.

The seventh stanza describes the funeral, where their only hope was in religion, though it was an "awful leisure." It was unpleasant for the narrator to place her faith in something as intangible as religion.

Ms Dickinson expresses her grief and jealousy at the death of this woman by stressing setting, feelings, using language and capitalization of initial letters of important words.

Essay E

In the poem by Emily Dickinson the speaker experiences a range of emotions towards the woman's death which lead to her final attitude that even through death life will go on with nature regulating your time until the end. This attitude is shown through the speaker's diction beginning in the first stanza where she describes the night as "common" (l 2) but already is realizing that there is something different about this particular night when she says "Except the Dying -- this to Us / Made Nature different" (ll 3-4). It is clear that throughout the next six stanzas the speaker makes further use of language to reveal her attitude towards the woman's death.

In the second stanza the speaker begins to notice the small and trivial things in life that were normally overlooked, but now that there is, "this great light upon [their] minds" (l 7) which is the knowledge of the woman's impending death, the speaker and the people around her notice more things because they realize their importance now.

The speaker experiences feelings of guilt in the next two stanzas over the thought that she will go on living while this woman dies. She states that there was, "a Blame / That others could exist / While She must finish ..." (ll 12-14). In this same stanza the speaker also feels jealousy towards the woman because she feels that through the woman's death, the woman will now be "so nearly infinite." (l 16)

In the fifth stanza the speaker's attitude undergoes another change, moving from guilt and jealousy to a new realization that death comes swiftly, "We waited while She passed -- It was a narrow time --" (ll 17-18). The speaker's attitude towards the woman's death is now of sadness and feeling disturbed. She states when news of the woman's death came their souls were "Too jostled ... to speak" (l 19)

In the next stanza the speaker uses imagery of a reed bending to water to reveal the peacefulness of the woman's death and she recalls that the woman "consented" (l 24) to her death. The simile of the woman like a reed and the imagery of this entire stanza portray the speaker's peaceful attitude at this point.

In the last stanza the speaker realizes that their life will still go on and that they will continue to do the normal routine, day to day things, but that their life is only an "awful leisure" that time and nature will regulate until their own death. As in the last two lines the speaker says that "And then an awful leisure was / Belief to regulate" (ll 27-28). The speaker's attitude here shows that people may believe they regulate their own lives, but in reality they do not.

Through the use of language such as the speaker's diction, imagery, and use of simile, the attitude of the speaker is shown. The death of the woman inspires many feelings in the speaker which are revealed throughout the seven stanzas.

Essay G

It often takes the death of a friend or an acquaintance to reveal the power of life and death, and humankind's vulnerability to fate. In this poem, the speaker's attitude towards the woman's death is shown by the speaker's heightened sense of the nature of existence, the capriciousness of fate, and sense of the unyielding quality of death.

The first hints of the speaker's attitude towards the woman's death are found in the first two stanzas. The woman's death, the speaker says, "made Nature different," and those present "... noticed smallest things -- / Things overlooked before." The speaker has been moved to observe the world of existence with a heightened sensitivity by the woman's death; things usually considered trivial or banal receive importance because of their place in the realm of the living -- they exist, and the woman does not. What would have been a "Common Night" has been embossed into the speaker's memory, and all of its details will be remembered. Thus the speaker implies that it is Death and "Dying" that reveals the world of life and existence.

The speaker is also impressed by the strength of the role that fate and destiny play in one's life. In the third and fourth stanzas the speaker finds the world divided into the kingdoms of the living and the dead, literally and symbolically, as can be seen in the lines "Her final Room / And Rooms where Those to be alive / Tomorrow were." The finality of death and one's assignment to either the realm of the living or the dead are sensed by the speaker. In addition, there is in the speaker's attitude a sense of iniquity that "Others could exist / While she must [italics mine] finish quite." The speaker is made aware of the lack of control people have over their lives; if, in fact, the power to end or continue one's existence is not and can not be held by humankind.

Lastly, the speaker relates his impressions of the weakness of life. Perhaps what seemed to be a powerful, full existence is defeated by Death in a trifling matter of minutes. The speaker compares the woman to a "Reed / Bent to the Water." From this we can infer that the speaker is aware of the hopelessness of the woman's ability to fight with Death to keep her life. Rather, as the speaker relates, the woman "struggled scarce -- / consented, and was dead --." The speaker's attitude towards the woman's 'agreement' to concede to Death's will seems to be one of sympathy towards the woman because of her weakness as compared to the omnipotence of Death. The understanding is derived from the speaker's realization of the inseparable nature of Death and the futility of a struggle. Like many sensitive people who witness the fading of a person's life into nothingness, the speaker is left with a feeling of his own lack of control over death, and over the time remaining in his own existence.

Essay N

Through its unique use of language, Emily Dickinson's poem evokes a feeling of restlessness, and an acute awareness of one's vitality, mortality, and powerlessness in the face of nature. The persona describes the night of the woman's death in a quiet and thoughtful manner, without using particularly vivid imagery, and as such, creates a setting that is more psychological than sensory. In fact, the poem itself flows like thought, with pauses but without breaks or conclusive cadences. The last stanza exemplifies this characteristic through its employment of dashes (most notably at the end itself) but avoidance of stronger punctuation or conclusive language.

One of the most immediately apparent characteristics of the poem is its frequent use of capitalization to highlight certain significant words. In general, the words Dickinson has chosen to capitalize relate to the dying woman, the observers, or to the world as it appears to the observers in this strange time. For example, the first stanza capitalizes the words "She" and "Dying" (which relate to the woman herself), the word "Us" (which relates to the observers), and the words "Night," "Common Night," and "Nature" (which relate to the perceived environment).

The element of time is handled in an unusual way within the poem. It seems nearly to stand still, as the speaker implies through the use of the phrase "It was a narrow time --." Its flow is hampered through the use of pauses, and through the relative lack of action in the poem. Time may even be seen as a restricting element; before the woman died, it was precious and dwelled upon (a time too sacred to speak or act), after her death its very abundance is oppressive to the observers, who must return to their lives in the solemnity of the aftermath, having glimpsed their mortality, and even envied the simplicity of the dying woman's state.

The death itself is not portrayed so much a tragedy as a disruption, and aberration in Nature and Time in which a human being ceases to exist. All others present at this event are sensitized to their own existence and aliveness in a remarkable way. As the poet herself writes, "We noticed smallest things -- / Things overlooked before / By this great light upon our Minds." Strangely enough, the bystanders experience feelings that may almost be called "guilty." Though they have done no wrong, they cannot help but feel privileged to be alive and healthy. Furthermore, through no fault of their own, they play a very peripheral role in the event itself.

In this poem Dickinson effectively creates a psychological setting that is at the same time quiet and disturbed, by simulating with her use of language, the flow of thought and time. She deals with one of the inevitabilities of human existence in an understated and contemplative way that somehow serves to heighten the solemnity of the occasion - and in doing so, she has created a fascinating commentary on the temporary nature of human existence.