

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 (10)
Between Her final Room
And Rooms where Those to be alive
Tomorrow were, a Blame

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

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

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 --

Essay #1

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.

Essay #2

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 #3

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.