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AP ENGLISH LITERATURE · FREE RESOURCE

The Prose Fiction Essay (Q2) Step by Step

This guide walks you through the AP English Literature prose fiction analysis essay from the first read of the passage to the last sentence of a scored essay. Read Parts 1-5 to learn the method, study the full worked example in Part 6 (passage, annotation, plan, a 6-point essay, and a 3-point essay with diagnosis), then write the three practice essays in Part 7 under timed conditions and score them with the rubric in Part 1.

Part 1: What Q2 asks, and how it is scored

The task

Question 2 gives you an excerpt of roughly 500-700 words from a novel or short story (very rarely a play), with the author's name, the title, a date, and a one- or two-sentence setup. The prompt wording has been stable since 2019:

"The following excerpt is from [work] by [author], published in [year]. In this passage, [situation]. Read the passage carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how [author] uses literary elements and techniques to convey/portray/develop [the complex ____]."

The four bullets below the prompt are the same as Q1: a thesis presenting a defensible interpretation; evidence selected to support a line of reasoning; an explanation of how the evidence supports it; correct grammar and punctuation. You have a suggested 40 minutes. See the free-response PDFs on the College Board's past-questions page.

The rubric

The rubric is the same as for Q1.

ROW	POINTS	WHAT EARNS THE POINT(S)
A. Thesis	0-1	A defensible interpretation responding to the prompt; not a restatement, not a device list, not a summary.

ROW	POINTS	WHAT EARNS THE POINT(S)
B. Evidence and Commentary	0-4	1: general evidence, summary. 2: some specific evidence and some explanation, no line of reasoning (or a faulty one). 3: specific evidence for all claims; commentary explains how some evidence supports the line of reasoning; explains how at least one technique contributes to meaning. 4: consistent commentary; explains how multiple techniques contribute to meaning.
C. Sophistication	0-1	Sustained complexity, broader context, alternative interpretations, or consistently vivid and persuasive style.

Why Q2 is the hardest essay

Q2 has had the lowest mean score of the three essays in recent years (about 3.2-3.3 in 2024 and 2025). The Chief Reader reports name the reasons, and every one of them can be fixed:

WHAT WENT WRONG	WHAT TO DO
Students wrote only about the main character and ignored secondary characters (2025: a daughter and an older woman were overlooked)	Track <i>every</i> person on the page; ask what each reveals about the main character
Students missed irony and humor (2024)	Ask of every sentence: does the narrator mean exactly this?
Students named a word's theme ("authenticity") without exploring it	Take one word and write a paragraph on it
Students read a loaded word one-dimensionally	Ask what else the word could mean
Claims were not connected into a line of reasoning	Topic sentences should build, not repeat
Students summarized plot	Paraphrase events in a clause; spend sentences on language

Part 2: Reading the prompt

"Complex relationship / attitude / perspective / portrayal"

"Complex" is an instruction. The passage is built so that a character or narrator feels two or more things at once, changes, or contains a tension. Your job is to find the tension and explain how the author's choices create it. To test whether you have found it, fill in: "She feels ___ and also ___ about ___."

The target

Underline the target in the prompt. Typical targets:

PROMPT ASKS ABOUT	WHAT TO TRACK
a character's complex experience or response	what she notices, does, says, avoids; how the narrator frames it
a narrator's complex attitude toward a character	the narrator's word choices, irony, distance
a complex relationship between characters	what each says to the other and what each hides; the minor character's role
a complex portrayal of a place	how place reflects or shapes a character

Part 3: The five lenses

The Course and Exam Description organizes literary analysis into big ideas: Character, Setting, Structure, Narration, and Figurative Language. In a prose passage, these are your five lenses. For each lens, ask the questions below and jot answers during your second read.

LENS	QUESTIONS TO ASK	EXAMPLES OF EVIDENCE
Narration	Who tells it? How close to the character? Is the narrator ironic, sympathetic, detached? What does the narrator emphasize or omit?	an ironic aside; free indirect discourse; a narrator who knows more than the character
Characterization	What does the character do, say, think? What do others say or do around her? What does she avoid?	gestures, voice, contradictions between thought and speech
Setting	What details of place and time appear, and what feelings do they carry? How does the character relate to them?	a lawn mowed in stripes; a house that smells of cedar
Structure	How is the passage ordered? Where does it turn? Which sentences are long or short? What is the last sentence doing?	chronology, shifts from external to internal, a closing image
Figurative language	What images, similes, metaphors, and symbols appear? What do they add that plain language could not?	"a spine" as an image of control; a kettle as permission

You will not use all five lenses in an essay. You use the two or three that cluster around the prompt's target.

Part 4: The method

Three reads

READ	TIME	JOB	YOU WRITE
1	3 min	Literal read: who, where, what happens, how the passage moves	A five-word gist beside each paragraph; underline every person's name
2	2 min	Prompt-guided read: hunt for the target	Underlines, one-word margin notes by lens
3	2 min	Patterns and turn: repetition, irony, contrast, sentence length, the last sentence	A bracket around the turn; circle the repeated words

N-F-I for prose

1. **Notice** everything: names, verbs, adjectives, similes, where sentences get short, what is not said, what minor characters do.
2. **Focus** on the details that cluster around the prompt's target; group them into two or three families.
3. **Interpret**: for each family, explain *how* the technique creates an effect and *why* the effect shapes the complexity.

What to do with a minor character

The Chief Reader reports repeatedly note that a secondary character is the key students overlook. Ask:

- What does this person say or do that the main character cannot?
- What does the main character's reaction to this person reveal?
- Does the narrator treat this person ironically, warmly, coolly?
- Does the minor character supply information that complicates the main character's self-image?

Thesis frames for prose

Although [the character appears ___ at first], [the author] uses [narration / characterization / structure] to reveal [a deeper or opposing feeling], suggesting [interpretation].

FRAME	TEMPLATE
Surface and depth	"Although [character] responds with , [author]'s reveals ___."
Narrator and character	"The narrator's ironic distance exposes ___ that [character] cannot admit."
Displacement	"[Character]'s irritation at ___ displaces a grief she cannot yet name."

FRAME	TEMPLATE
Movement	"The passage moves from ___ to , and the shift in [syntax/setting] enacts . "

Organizing the body by idea

Do not write "paragraph on narration, paragraph on setting, paragraph on diction." Organize by the passage's movements or by the facets of the complexity.

DEVICE ORGANIZATION (AVOID)	IDEA ORGANIZATION (USE)
Narration / Diction / Syntax	The armor she wears; the minor character's disruption; the private response

Each body paragraph: topic sentence with an analytical verb; two to four short quotations (a word to a phrase long), integrated into your own sentence; commentary at least twice the length of the quotation sentences, explaining *how* and *why*; a link.

Commentary starters for prose

- "The narrator's choice of ___ rather than ___ suggests..."
- "By placing ___ beside ___, the passage..."
- "The shift from long to short sentences enacts..."
- "The detail of ___ allows the reader to see what [character] cannot..."
- "Through [minor character], the passage exposes..."
- "The irony is that..."
- "The word ___ carries the connotation of , **which .**"

Sophistication in prose

The four official pathways apply as in Q1. In prose, the most reliable pathways are (1) sustained attention to irony and ambiguity (what the narrator knows that the character does not; an image that can mean two opposite things) and (4) a consistently precise, vivid style. For pathway (3), consider an alternative interpretation of the key ambiguity: "One might read the father's keeping the figures among menus as neglect; but the drawer's placement in the kitchen, the room where he actually lived, suggests the opposite." Do this only if you can adjudicate between the readings.

Pacing

MINUTES	TASK
0-3	Read 1 with gists
3-7	Reads 2 and 3 with lens notes and bracket the turn
7-10	N-F-I list, thesis, three topic sentences
10-35	Write: intro 3 min, three body paragraphs about 7 min each, short conclusion 1 min

MINUTES	TASK
35-40	Reread, fix grammar, add one missing word-level comment

Part 5: Common traps

TRAP	FIX
"The author uses imagery and diction to show that Ines is sad."	Name the exact complexity and how the choices create it.
Retelling what happens	Paraphrase in a clause; spend the sentence on language.
Ignoring the minor character	Give her a paragraph or part of one.
Treating the narrator and character as the same voice	Separate what the narrator knows from what the character knows.
Ending with a generic moral	End with the final detail's effect.

Part 6: The full worked example

The prompt

The following passage is an original excerpt written for this guide, in the style of a contemporary short story. In this passage, Ines Calloway arrives at the house of her father, who has recently died. Read the passage carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how the author uses literary elements and techniques to convey Ines's complex response to returning to her father's house.

The passage (original; paragraphs numbered)

[1] When Ines Calloway arrived at her father's house, the lawn had been mowed. This struck her as an affront. For three weeks, by her reckoning, no one had lived there, and yet someone had taken the trouble to cut the grass in even stripes, as though the house were expecting company. She stood at the gate with her keys in one hand and the realtor's folder in the other, and she found that she resented the stripes more than she had resented the funeral.

[2] "I hope you don't mind," said a voice from the next yard. Mrs. Pell, who had been mentioned in her father's letters for fifteen years and never once described, turned out to be small and upright, with a trowel held like a pointer. "He kept it so nicely. It seemed a shame."

[3] "That's very kind," said Ines, in the voice she used for clients.

[4] "Not kind. Habit. I did his hedge on Thursdays." Mrs. Pell considered her. "He talked about you, you know. Mostly the numbers. Your numbers, I

mean, the quarterly ones. He kept them in the kitchen drawer with the takeaway menus."

[5] Ines did not answer. She had sent those figures, the promotions and the bonuses, each spring in a card, believing that a daughter who could not visit might at least be legible. It had not occurred to her that they would be filed among menus, or that they would be anything but a bridge. Now the thought of the drawer, its soft collision of paper, undid something she had been holding in the shape of a spine.

[6] "I'll let you get on," said Mrs. Pell, and bent to a row of marigolds with the satisfied air of a woman who has delivered a parcel to the correct address.

[7] Inside, the house smelled of cedar and toast. Ines set the folder on the hall table, where a bowl of keys, none of them hers, held a small silence of its own. In the kitchen, the drawer was exactly where she had been told. She did not open it. She filled the kettle instead, and stood listening to it begin, a sound so ordinary that it seemed, for a moment, like permission.

Step 1: Read 1 (gists)

[1] Ines resents a mowed lawn. [2] Neighbor Mrs. Pell explains. [3] Ines answers coolly. [4] Pell reveals the father kept her numbers. [5] Ines is shaken privately. [6] Pell leaves, satisfied. [7] Inside, Ines fills the kettle.

Characters: Ines, Mrs. Pell, the absent father (present through objects). Setting: gate, lawn, kitchen. Situation: a daughter arrives to sell the house.

Step 2: Read 2 (lens notes)

LENS	NOTES
Narration	Third person limited, but with ironic distance: "This struck her as an affront"; "the funeral" is mentioned as something she resented <i>less</i> ; the narrator knows how Ines hides ("the voice she used for clients").
Characterization	Ines: controlled, professional, resentful, guilty. Mrs. Pell: direct, practical, kind but unsentimental ("Not kind. Habit."). Father: known through objects: letters, drawer, keys, lawn.
Setting	Lawn with "even stripes" (order, expectation); "cedar and toast" (warmth); "a bowl of keys, none of them hers" (she is an outsider).
Structure	Outside to inside; public voice to private thought; talk to silence; last sentence turns to the ordinary.
Figurative language	"legible" (a daughter as a text); "bridge"; "a spine" (the image of her control); "a small silence of its own" (personification); the kettle as "permission."

Step 3: Read 3 (patterns and the turn)

- **The turn.** Paragraph 4, when Mrs. Pell reveals the drawer. Before: Ines is in control (the “client” voice). After: control cracks (“undid something”).
- **Irony.** Ines resents the lawn *more than the funeral*: a displacement. Ines thought the numbers were a “bridge”; the father filed them among menus. The narrator leaves the meaning of that placement ambiguous: neglect, or the intimacy of keeping them where he lived?
- **Sentence length.** Short sentences in dialogue (“Not kind. Habit.”) against the long, winding sentences of Ines’s reflection in [5].
- **The last sentence.** The kettle becomes “permission.” Permission to do what? To feel, to grieve, to stay.
- **Repetition.** “Menus” and “drawer” return in [4], [5], [7].

Step 4: N-F-I

Notice: mowed lawn; “affront”; “even stripes”; “expecting company”; “resented the stripes more than... the funeral”; Mrs. Pell never described; trowel “like a pointer”; “Not kind. Habit.”; “numbers”; “legible”; “bridge”; “takeaway menus”; “soft collision of paper”; “spine”; “satisfied air... parcel”; “cedar and toast”; “keys, none of them hers”; “did not open it”; kettle; “permission.”

Focus (three families): 1. *Armor and displacement* ([1], [3]): the resentment and the client voice. 2. *Mrs. Pell as the disruptor* ([2], [4], [6]): what she brings. 3. *The private response* ([5], [7]): the drawer, the spine, the kettle.

Interpret: Ines’s resentment of the lawn is displaced grief and guilt. The client’s voice is armor. Mrs. Pell, who is unsentimental, breaks the armor by offering information (the numbers) that Ines can neither accept nor reject. The ending is not catharsis but a small, ordinary allowance.

Step 5: Thesis

Although Ines meets her father’s house with irritation and professional composure, the narrator’s ironic distance and the details Mrs. Pell supplies reveal that her resentment is displaced grief and guilt, a feeling she cannot yet name and so allows herself only through an ordinary act at the end.

Step 6: Plan

PART	IDEA	EVIDENCE	TECHNIQUE
Body 1	Armor: resentment displaces grief	“affront,” “resented the stripes more than... the funeral,” “voice she used for clients”	Narrator’s irony; displacement; characterization through voice
Body 2	Mrs. Pell punctures the armor	“Not kind. Habit.”; the drawer; “legible”; “bridge”	Minor character; dialogue; diction; ambiguity of the drawer
Body 3	The private response	“soft collision of paper,” “spine,” “did not open it,” kettle, “permission”	Imagery, syntax, structure

PART	IDEA	EVIDENCE	TECHNIQUE
Conclusion	The ambiguity of the drawer and permission		

The 6-point essay, with margin commentary

In this excerpt, the author presents Ines Calloway's return to her late father's house through a narrator who stays close to her thoughts yet smiles, slightly, at what she cannot admit. Although Ines meets her father's house with irritation and professional composure, the narrator's ironic distance and the details Mrs. Pell supplies reveal that her resentment is displaced grief and guilt, a feeling she cannot yet name and so allows herself only through an ordinary act at the end. [Thesis: defensible, complex, sets up a three-part line of reasoning. Row A.]

The opening paragraph establishes Ines's anger as a kind of armor. The narrator reports that the mowed lawn "struck her as an affront," a phrase so formal that it makes her indignation sound rehearsed, and then adds that she "resented the stripes more than she had resented the funeral." [Quotation integrated; commentary immediately notes the formal diction of "affront."] The comparison is quietly absurd: no reader believes that grass bothers her more than her father's death, so the narrator lets the gap between what Ines says and what she feels show. Her resentment of "even stripes," which suggest care and expectation, "as though the house were expecting company," is resentment of a tenderness she did not provide. [Specific analysis of the image and its connotations; links resentment to guilt.] The same defensive control shapes her reply to Mrs. Pell: "That's very kind," she says, "in the voice she used for clients." The narrator's phrase turns a polite response into a professional performance, so that the reader sees Ines treating a neighbor the way she treats strangers, safe behind her work. [Characterization through voice; explains the effect on the reader.]

That armor is breached not by Ines but by Mrs. Pell, whose bluntness the narrator renders with dry affection. Described only after fifteen years of being "mentioned" and "never once described," she appears small and upright with "a trowel held like a pointer," an image that makes her an instructor with her own authority. [Uses the minor character and an image; "pointer" explained.] Her correction, "Not kind. Habit," in two clipped sentences, rejects Ines's polite language and replaces it with fact, so that the plain syntax contrasts with Ines's formal vocabulary. [Syntax explained as a contrast.] Then Mrs. Pell delivers the passage's central ambiguity: the father "talked about" Ines, "mostly the numbers," which he "kept... in the kitchen drawer with the takeaway menus." The detail can be read as neglect, since the figures are filed with discarded menus, or as intimacy, since the kitchen was where he lived. The narrator refuses to decide, and Ines herself cannot, which is why the information unsettles her more than a plain accusation or a plain comfort would. [Considers two readings and shows why the ambiguity matters: sophistication pathway 3, sustained.] Mrs. Pell's departure with "the satisfied air of a woman who has delivered a parcel to the correct address" is the narrator's gentle joke: the information was a parcel, and it has arrived at its intended recipient. [Humor identified and explained; a secondary character carries the plot of the feeling.]

Ines's response is registered in images rather than speech. The figures she sent were meant to make her "legible," a word that treats a daughter as a text to be read from a distance, and a "bridge," a structure for crossing a gap she did not cross herself. [Close reading of two word choices.] When the thought of the drawer, with its "soft collision of paper," "undid something she had been holding in the shape of a spine," the sentence lengthens and loosens, as if the syntax too were losing its posture. [Syntax mirrors content.] The two images, the sound of paper and the unbuilt spine, move her from the hard surface of the opening to a physical, bodily

collapse. She does not open the drawer. [Short sentence, noticed.] In the last paragraph the narrator turns to the ordinary: "cedar and toast," "a bowl of keys, none of them hers" that "held a small silence of its own." The personified silence makes the house itself a quiet presence, an absent father still occupying it, and the keys that are "none of them hers" confirm her position as an outsider. [Setting and personification analyzed.] The kettle, "a sound so ordinary that it seemed, for a moment, like permission," ends the passage on a modest, carefully qualified release: "for a moment," "seemed." [The qualifiers are noticed; the ending is not overread.]

By ending with permission rather than tears, the author portrays grief as something Ines can approach only sideways, through objects and routine. The passage's complexity lies in what it withholds: it never tells us whether the numbers meant love or neglect to her father, and so it never tells us what, exactly, Ines is allowed to feel. [Conclusion extends the meaning and returns to the ambiguity, sustaining the tension throughout.]

Scoring: 6/6.

ROW	SCORE	WHY
A	1	Defensible interpretation that names the complexity (resentment as displaced grief and guilt) and previews the line of reasoning.
B	4	Specific evidence from all seven paragraphs; commentary consistently explains how narration, characterization (including the secondary character), syntax, imagery, and setting build the interpretation; techniques are shown working together; paragraph topic sentences build a line of reasoning (armor, disruption, private response).
C	1	The essay explores the central ambiguity of the drawer, considers two competing readings, identifies the narrator's irony and humor, and keeps a vivid, precise style throughout.

The 3-point essay, with diagnosis

In the passage by the author, Ines Calloway comes back to her dead father's house and has complex feelings. The author uses imagery, diction, and point of view to show how Ines feels. [Thesis: restates the prompt ("complex feelings") and lists devices. No claim about what the feelings are. Row A: 0.]

In the first paragraph Ines is angry that the lawn was mowed. She says it was an "affront" and that she resented it more than the funeral. This shows that Ines is angry and sad about her dad dying. The author uses diction like "affront" to show that she is angry. [Specific quotations from the passage, but commentary says only "shows

that Ines is angry” and names diction without analyzing the word. The clever “more than the funeral” detail is quoted without explaining the irony.]

Then Mrs. Pell talks to her. She says her father kept the numbers in the kitchen drawer. This makes Ines upset because she thought the numbers would be a bridge. The author uses imagery like “soft collision of paper” and “a spine” to show Ines is upset. Mrs. Pell is a neighbor who is nice. [Accurate paraphrase of the pivotal scene and a good detail (the “bridge” expectation), but the commentary is again “shows she is upset.” The secondary character is reduced to “a neighbor who is nice,” missing her bluntness and function.]

At the end Ines makes tea and the kettle is “like permission.” This shows she is starting to feel better. In conclusion, the author uses imagery and diction to show that Ines has complex feelings about her father’s death. [A plausible reading of the ending but unexamined; “feel better” is a flattening of a qualified moment. The conclusion repeats the prompt.]

Scoring: 3/6.

ROW	SCORE	WHY
A	0	No defensible interpretation: “complex feelings” is the prompt; “imagery, diction, and point of view” is a list.
B	3	Evidence is specific across the passage and supports each claim; at least one technique (the imagery of the drawer) is tied to meaning, if thinly. But commentary mostly states that quotations “show” an emotion and rarely explains how. It does not reach 4 because it does not consistently explain how, and the minor character is flattened.
C	0	No tension or ambiguity is sustained.

How to revise toward a 5:

1. Replace the thesis with a claim that names the complexity (resentment as displaced grief).
2. Pick one phrase per paragraph (“more than she had resented the funeral”; “Not kind. Habit.”; “a spine”) and write two sentences on how its wording works.
3. Give Mrs. Pell a full paragraph: her bluntness is the passage’s turn.
4. Replace “shows” with a verb of function: “exposes,” “undercuts,” “mirrors,” “withholds.”
5. End on the ambiguity of “permission” rather than “feels better.”

Part 7: Three practice prompts

Time yourself for 40 minutes each. The passages below are **original, written for this guide**. Score yourself with the rubric in Part 1; planning notes are in the Answer Key.

Practice 1

In the following original passage, the narrator describes the town where he grew up. Read the passage carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how the author uses literary elements and techniques to convey the narrator's complex attitude toward his hometown.

The town of Harlow Crossing advertises itself, on a sign I have never seen anyone look at, as "A Good Place to Begin." It is. Everyone I knew began there, and nearly all of them, I noticed, kept beginning, year after year, with the cheerful stamina of people who have not been told what comes next.

I left at eighteen with one bag and a speech. The speech was for my mother, who listened to it at the kitchen table with her hands around a cup, and nodded at the places where a nod was wanted, and then asked whether I had packed a coat. I have not returned in twenty years, which I mention in the tone of a man reporting a sunny forecast. Last month, however, I caught myself giving directions to a stranger in another city, and found that I had said, without thinking, "Turn left at the feed store." There is no feed store here. There is not, I suspect, a feed store there any longer either.

Practice 2

In the following original passage, a teacher returns a graded essay to a student. Read the passage carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how the author uses literary elements and techniques to portray the complex relationship between Mr. Adeyemi and his student.

Mr. Adeyemi returned the essays face down, a courtesy he extended to no one but Priya, whose paper he laid on the desk with a particular lightness, as though it might be startled. She turned it over. There was no grade, only a single line in his small, upright hand: Where did you learn to hide this well?

"I don't know what you mean," she said.

"Of course you don't." He sat on the edge of the next desk, which he never did. The window behind him had been fogged by the radiator, and the January light made him look briefly like a photograph of himself. "It's a good essay. Every sentence is a locked door. I'd like, someday, to see you leave one open."

Priya considered the paper, and then the clock, and then the paper again. "Is that a grade?" she asked.

"It's the only kind I have today," said Mr. Adeyemi, and went to give the rest of the class back their Bs.

Practice 3

In the following original passage, a hostess prepares for a dinner party. Read the passage carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how the author uses literary elements and techniques to convey the complex portrayal of Mrs. Lathrop.

Mrs. Lathrop had arranged the evening as one arranges a bouquet, with an eye to what could be hidden. The Fenwicks, who disagreed about everything but dessert, would sit at opposite ends; the young curate, who could be relied upon to laugh at anything said by a person older than himself, would be placed beside Colonel Marsh. As for her husband, he would be seated where he could be seen but not, with luck, heard.

She went through the dining room twice with the delicate frown of a general. The silver was correct. The candles, after some deliberation, were shortened by half an inch, since half an inch was precisely the difference between atmosphere and fire hazard. When the first carriage was heard on the gravel she stood quite still in the hall, her hand against her collar, and for the length of a single breath was a woman who wished, more than she had ever wished anything, that no one would come.

Then the bell rang, and she smiled, and was herself.

Answer Key

Practice 1: Harlow Crossing

Situation and arc. First-person narrator, twenty years gone, speaks with dry irony about the town and then reveals an unplanned attachment.

The turn. “Last month, however” (the stranger and the feed store).

Complexity. Amused condescension and detached irony versus an involuntary loyalty. Note the sign “A Good Place to Begin” (the narrator mocks that no one leaves it); the “speech” for his mother versus her question about a coat (the mother’s practical love versus his rhetorical departure); “I mention in the tone of a man reporting a sunny forecast” (a self-ironic denial); “Turn left at the feed store” (the habit of memory persists); the last sentence concedes that the store may no longer exist, so the town he carries is a place that has vanished.

Sample thesis. “Although the narrator describes Harlow Crossing with the ironic condescension of someone who escaped it, his offhand giving of directions to a store that may no longer exist reveals an attachment he has not admitted, so that his attitude joins amused superiority with involuntary loyalty.”

Minor character to use. The mother, whose practical question about a coat answers the speech with care.

Practice 2: Mr. Adeyemi and Priya

Situation and arc. A teacher returns an essay with a written question, then speaks to a guarded student.

Complexity. Mr. Adeyemi is perceptive and invested but restrained; Priya is skilled and defensive. Their relationship is intimate (he sits on the desk “which he never did”), yet oblique (the question is written; the grade is withheld). Humor and tenderness coexist.

Evidence. “face down, a courtesy he extended to no one but Priya” (selective attention); “as though it might be startled” (personification, tenderness toward the paper and the student); “Every sentence is a locked door” (metaphor critiquing her control); “I’d like, someday, to see you leave one open” (the wish and the “someday” delay); “Is that a grade?” (her deflection); “the only kind I have today” and “the rest of the class... their Bs” (an ironic, affectionate last line that puts her outside the usual system).

Sample thesis. “Although Mr. Adeyemi’s treatment of Priya appears to be mere teacherly attention, the passage’s careful physical details, its metaphor of the locked door, and its deflating final line reveal a relationship of guarded mutual regard in which both of them communicate by withholding.”

Practice 3: Mrs. Lathrop

Situation and arc. The narrator presents Mrs. Lathrop in comic control, then gives a single moment of vulnerability, then returns her to her role.

The turn. “for the length of a single breath was a woman who wished... that no one would come” and the closing line “Then the bell rang, and she smiled, and was herself.”

Complexity. Social mastery versus private exhaustion or dread; satire of a manipulator versus sympathy. Evidence: the bouquet simile (“what could be hidden”); the husband “seen but not, with luck, heard” (wry); “a general” (martial diction); the candles measured “half an inch” (comic precision); the brief breath of wish; “and was herself,” which is ambiguous: is the social self the real one, or a performance she has become?

Sample thesis. “Although the narrator satirizes Mrs. Lathrop as a general of drawing-room tactics, a single suspended breath of wishing ‘that no one would come’ complicates the satire into sympathy, suggesting that her command of the evening is also the armor of a woman for whom the performance has become indistinguishable from the self.”

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