

Question 2

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

The following passage was written by Richard Rodriguez, the first college-educated member of his family. Read the passage carefully. Then write an essay analyzing how Rodriguez' presentation of the events in the passage suggests his attitude toward his family and himself. You might consider such elements as narrative structure, selection of detail, manipulation of language, and tone.

Line
(5) My mother is not surprised that her children are well-off. Her two daughters are business executives. Her oldest son is a lawyer. She predicted it all long ago. "Someday," she used to say when we were young, "you will all grow up and all be very rich. You'll have lots of money to buy me presents. But I'll be a little old lady. I won't have any teeth or hair. So you'll have to buy me soft food and put a blue wig on my head. And you'll buy me a big fur coat. But you'll only be able to see my eyes."
(10)

Every Christmas now the floor around her is carpeted with red and green wrapping paper. And her feet are wreathed with gifts.

(15) By the time the last gift is unwrapped, everyone seems very tired. The room has become uncomfortably warm. The talk grows listless. ("Does anyone want coffee or more cake?" Somebody groans.) Children are falling asleep. Someone gets up to leave, prompting others to leave. ("We have to get up early tomorrow.")

(20) "Another Christmas," my mother says. She says that same thing every year, so we all smile to hear it again.

Children are bundled up for the fast walk to the car. My mother stands by the door calling good-bye. She stands with a coat over her shoulders, looking into the dark where expensive foreign cars idle sharply. She seems, all of a sudden, very small. She looks worried.
(25)

"Don't come out, it's too cold," somebody shouts at her or at my father, who steps out onto the porch. I watch my younger sister in a shiny mink jacket bend slightly to kiss my mother before she rushes down the front steps. My mother stands waving toward no one in
(30)

(35) particular. She seems sad to me. How sad? Why? (Sad that we all are going home? Sad that it was not quite, can never be, the Christmas one remembers having had once?) I am tempted to ask her quietly if there is anything wrong. (But these are questions of paradise, Mama.)

My brother drives away.

(40) "Daddy shouldn't be outside," my mother says. "Here, take this jacket out to him."

She steps into the warmth of the entrance hall and hands me the coat she has been wearing over her shoulders.

(45) I take it to my father and place it on him. In that instant I feel the thinness of his arms. He turns. He asks if I am going home now. It is, I realize, the only thing that he has said to me all evening.

Go on to Question 3.

Question 2

Commentary

In asking students to “write an essay analyzing” how Richard Rodriguez’s “presentation of the events in the passage suggests his attitude toward his family and himself,” this question demands that students be alert to subtle tone, reflective musing, and the language that conveys those characteristics. In doing so, this question inextricably and overtly links reading and writing. Through the passage’s 47 lines, the reader shares in the writer’s reflection as he seeks to understand the delicate and ambivalent changes in his family’s situation. To discover for themselves those changes, students were asked to consider “such elements as narrative structure, selection of detail, manipulation of language, and tone.”

Nearly all students found some elements of the question easily accessible because the passage drew upon memories each student has of family gatherings or of holidays past. What distinguished the more successful papers was the ability to demonstrate an understanding of Rodriguez’s attitude and to do so by appropriate consideration of the narrative elements. Middle-range papers often took for granted or suggested an understanding of the emotions presented, but were less successful in demonstrating that understanding with apt and ample evidence. Lower-scoring papers often merely listed narrative elements, misunderstood the writer’s attitude toward his family, or shifted focus to blame either the narrator or his mother for the changed situation.

Scoring Guide

General Directions: 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 a particularly 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 3. Essays with no response or essays unrelated to the question should be given to your table leader.

9-8 Papers meriting these scores persuasively demonstrate a clear understanding of Rodriguez’s attitude toward his family and himself and analyze with appropriate detail how he employs narrative elements to convey it. Papers in this category aptly support what they have to say and demonstrate stylistic maturity by an effective command of sentence structure, diction,

and organization. The writing reveals an ability to choose from and control a wide range of the elements of effective writing, but it need not be without flaws.

7-6 Essays earning these scores reveal an understanding of Rodriguez’s attitude toward his family and self through an analysis of some of the important narrative elements he uses to suggest his attitude. These papers typically discuss his presentation with less understanding or with less persuasive detail than the best papers. Some lapses in diction or syntax may be present, but the writing demonstrates sufficient control of the elements of composition to present the writer’s ideas clearly. The arguments in these essays may be sound, but may be presented with less coherence or persuasive force than essays in the 9-8 range.

5 These essays show some understanding of Rodriguez’s attitude toward his family and himself, but draw piecemeal conclusions or inconsistently use narrative elements to relate his attitude. They are adequately written, but may demonstrate inconsistent control over the elements of composition. Organization is evident, but may not be fully realized or particularly effective.

4-3 Essays earning these scores do not respond adequately to the question’s tasks, often revealing one or more of these flaws: a mere listing of several narrative elements; imprecise or ineffective analysis; a narrative focus on the family’s situation with little or no analysis of how Rodriguez presents the scene and his attitude. The writing is sufficient to convey the writer’s ideas, but may suggest weak control over diction, syntax, or organization. These essays may contain consistent spelling errors or some flaws in grammar.

2-1 These essays fail to respond adequately to the question’s tasks. Although the writer attempts to answer the question, the response exhibits little clarity about the writer’s attitude or only slight or misguided evidence in its support. They often reveal a fundamental misunderstanding of Rodriguez’s family situation or of his attitude toward it. These essays may be poorly written on several counts, be unpersuasively brief, or present only assertions without substantive evidence. They may reveal consistent weaknesses in grammar or other basic elements of composition.

HIGH SCORE

Richard Rodriguez, the speaker in this passage, uses a stream of consciousness technique characterized by a patch-work of present thoughts, feelings, and sensory perceptions to contrast rather vividly an ideal with reality. It is rather simple to gain a sense of the attitudes he has of himself and his family by piecing together the random details of past memories and present occurrences.

The speaker begins by stating that his mother is not surprised in the least by the worldly success her children have gained. In fact she predicted it long before it ever grew into fruition. She once told them that they would someday be very wealthy and would provide her with simple pleasures such as soft food for her to eat after her teeth have fallen out with age and a wig to cover her head after her hair also had succumbed to the years. The speaker recalls her as saying that they would be able to see her eyes, despite her aging countenance, and we are led to infer that her eyes would express her contentment. This memory is used by Rodriguez to assert to the reader the warm and happy future his mother fore-saw for herself and her family after they became educated and financially successful.

The author then jumps to the present during a Christmas celebration. It is apparent that the gifts have been abundant, especially for his mother; yet, the idealic family warmth is missing. Christmas has become devoid of love and dreams and more a cold ritual. The author interjects narrative representing typical background conversation. It all appears rather superficial and empty.

We the readers are next shown the scene as everyone leaves his mother's home. He mentions the expensive foreign cars which fill the drive-way and the luxurious mink jacket of his sister as she kisses her mother good-by before rushing off. Evidence of financial success abounds; his mother's dream has become reality.

The irony presented by the author is that the dream has not brought the peace and happiness it had once promised. The author mentions an undercurrent of sadness. He adds a striking detail of love; his mother's concern for his father's warmth as she removes the jacket from her own shoulders to be given to him as he waves good-by out in the cold; yet everything is portrayed as being empty.

The author acknowledges the thinness of his father's arm and closes the passage by his father asking if he is leaving. He realizes it is the only conversation they have shared all day.

It is apparent that a tone of disappointment colors this entire passage. The reality of success is not as splendid a vision as it is before it is gained. The family, the speaker seems to believe, is rich in material pleasures where it once was rich in love and sharing. The material items did not add to the genuine emotion of years past: they replaced it. The author appears to contemplate this fact, experience remorse over it, and wonder what went wrong. He doesn't accuse anyone of wrong-doing. He merely recalls the richness of days past with a mingling of regret and acceptance.

This essay illustrates clearly that a response need not be perfect to score well — just persuasively competent. The writer spends substantial time in the second paragraph summarizing the narrative with little comment about the effects of the scene, though the paragraph does contribute to the contrast the writer observes at the paper's conclusion. Although the diction is uneven, marred by misspellings and the occasional inexact choice of words, the writer does command the tools of writing and persuasion. Having established a thesis in paragraph one, the writer goes on to sustain that thesis, observing appropriately the wistful blend of emotions near the end of the Rodriguez excerpt.

Remembering that this represents essentially a first draft, the faculty consultants rewarded the student for doing well the tasks of the question. She or he clearly understood the author's attitude toward his family and himself, remarked on the significance of the narrated events in creating tone, and provided sound analysis of some of the important narrative elements.

MIDDLE SCORE

The presentation of events, the narrative structure, the selection of detail, and the author's tone all contribute to the expression of Rodriguez' attitude towards his family and himself. By engaging the reader and providing organization, Rodriguez allows his attitude to surface.

The general structure of the narrative is one of change of time. The first paragraph serves as a brief history and basis for the whole narrative. Rodriguez explains why every family Christmas is like it is by describing his mother's past ideals. The