AP Literature and Composition

Prose

The Birthday Party
by Katharine Brush
Overview
The prose analysis question asks that students read a fiction passage and examine the author’s writing style. One of the most important aspects of this question is to move beyond just summarizing the passage. Students must identify elements of the author’s style and comment on how they aid the author’s development of character, theme, etc.

Question Structure
- The prompt provides:
  - Background on the passage and author
  - A task for the writer to examine via their essay
  - A list of possible devices or strategies to focus reading/annotation

*Remember, even though some prose analysis prompts list specific strategies, that should NOT limit your response. Identifying any element a writer employs to create an effect is the purpose of this question.*

- The question includes a 40-80 line (approx.) fiction passage. Passages can be excerpts from novels, short stories, or plays.
- The fiction passage appears in double columns with line numbers.

Expectations
- Understand the author’s purpose and the complexity of the passage.
- Identify elements of style, devices, patterns, etc.
- Discuss how style impacts the passage.
- Refer directly to the passage through direct quotation or paraphrase.

Timing
- 40 minutes
Birthday party

They were a couple in their late thirties, and they looked unmistakably married. They sat on the banquette opposite us in a little narrow restaurant, having dinner. The man had a round, self-satisfied face, with glasses on it; the woman was fadingly pretty, in a big hat. There was nothing conspicuous about them, nothing particularly noticeable, until the end of their meal, when it suddenly became obvious that this was an Occasion—in fact, the husband’s birthday, and the wife had planned a little surprise for him.

It arrived, in the form of a small but glossy birthday cake, with one pink candle burning in the center. The headwaiter brought it in and placed it before the husband, and meanwhile the violin-and-piano orchestra played “Happy Birthday to You,” and the wife beamed with shy pride over her little surprise, and such few people as there were in the restaurant tried to help out with a pattering of applause. It became clear at once that help was needed, because the husband was not pleased. Instead, he was hotly embarrassed, and indignant at his wife for embarrassing him.

You looked at him and saw this and you thought, “Oh, now, don’t be like that!” But he was like that, and as soon as the little cake had been deposited on the table, and the orchestra had finished the birthday piece, and the general attention had shifted from the man and the woman, I saw him say something to her under his breath—some punishing thing, quick and curt and unkind. I couldn’t bear to look at the woman then, so I stared at my plate and waited for quite long time. Not long enough, though. She was still crying when I finally glanced over there again. Crying quietly and heartbrokenly and hopelessly, all to herself, under the gay big brim of her best hat.

Food for thought:

1. What was happening in 1946?

2. What is your task?

3. What does the title indicate, if anything?

4. What syntactical oddities do you notice (capitals, italics, etc)? Are these significant?

5. What kind of diction does the author use for the woman? The man? The situation?

6. What specific word choices jump out at you? Why?

7. How does this piece make readers feel after reading it?

8. Who is telling the story? Is this significant? What if the man or woman were telling the story?

9. What literary devices do you see?

10. What literary devices can you tie to authorial purpose?
Scoring Guidelines

General Directions: The score that you assign should reflect your judgment of the quality of the essay as a whole – its content, its style, its mechanics. Reward the writers for what they do well. The score for an exceptionally well-written essay may be raised by one point above the otherwise appropriate score. In no case may a poorly written essay be scored higher than a three (3).

9-8 These essays offer a persuasive analysis of how the author uses literary devices to achieve her purpose. The writers make a strong case for their interpretation of the story. They explore possibilities of character and situation; consider literary elements such as characterization, point of view, syntax, diction, and tone; and engage the text through apt and specific references. Although these essays may not be error-free, their perceptive analysis is apparent in writing that is clear, precise, and effectively organized. Generally, essays scored a nine (9) reveal more sophisticated analysis and more effective control of language than do essays scored an eight (8).

7-6 These essays offer a reasonable analysis of how the author uses literary devices to achieve her purpose. The writers provide a sustained, competent reading of the story, with attention to literary elements such as characterization, point of view, syntax, diction, and tone. Although these essays may not be error-free and may be less perceptive or less convincing than 9-8 essays, the writers present their ideas with clarity and control and refer to the text for support. Generally, essays scored a seven (7) present better developed analysis and more consistent command of the elements of effective composition than do essays scored a six (6).

5 These essays respond to the assigned task with a plausible reading of the story, but tend to be superficial or undeveloped in their treatment of how the author uses literary devices to achieve her purpose. While exhibiting some analysis of the story, implicit or explicit, the discussion of how literary elements contribute to the author’s purpose may be slight, and support from the text may be thin or tend toward paraphrase. While these writers demonstrate adequate control of language, their essays may be marred by surface errors. Generally, essays scored a five (5) lack the more effective organization and more sustained development characteristic of 7-6 papers.

4-3 These essays offer a less than thorough understanding of the task or less than adequate treatment of how the author uses literary devices to achieve her purpose. Often relying on plot summary or paraphrase, the writers may fail to articulate a convincing basis for understanding situation and character, or they may misread the story. These papers may be characterized by an unfocused or repetitive presentation of ideas, an absence of textual support, or an accumulation of errors. Generally, essays scored a four (4) exhibit better control over the elements of composition than those scored a three (3).

2-1 These essays compound the weaknesses of those in the 4-3 range. They may persistently misread the story or be unacceptably brief. They may contain pervasive errors that interfere with understanding. Although some attempt has been made to respond to the prompt, the writer’s ideas are presented with little clarity, organization, or support from the story. Essays scored a one (1) are especially inept or incoherent.

0 These essays make no more than a reference to the task.

- These essays are either left blank or are completely off-topic.
Review the rubric on the previous page. Read your essay and place the score you believe you earned here: _____

Why did you give yourself that score? __________________________________________________________

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What can you do to improve your score? ______________________________________________________

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How can your response above translate to future essays? What will you do differently? ____________

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Use the following space to rewrite your intro/thesis and at least one body paragraph.

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Sample A

“The Birthday Part” by Katherine Brush gives a brief insightful description of one nameless couples’ celebratory dinner date. Though on the surface the story may seem ordinary and typical, through Brush’s use of good diction, imagery, abrupt syntax, and third-person objectivity, she achieves a very dismal atmosphere and somber mood.

As the story begins, the mood is not very obvious because the speaker is simply straight-forward and dryly assertive in her observations. Bruch achieves objectivity by employing pronouns, “he” and “she”, in the place of names, for the man and woman. In affect, this prohibits the reader from feeling any further attachment to either person than the speaker herself. Brush is somewhat deceptive in her opening paragraph for she uses delightful imagery to symbolize the outwardly happy and content appearance of the couple. The man is described as “round, [having] a self-satisfied face” and the woman is “fadingly pretty in a big hat.” The big hat is of course deceptively symbolic of gaiety amongst the couple. Additionally, the big hat is in contrast to the rest of Brush’s description. “There was nothing conspicuous about them, nothing particularly noticeable.”

The ostentatious hat symbolizes the woman’s attempt to appear fabulous, or at the least, more than just ordinary. Brush closes the first paragraph by introducing the purpose behind her speaker’s story, that is, the speaker’s concern with a certain event which Brush capitalized as an “Occasion.” This tactic of capitalization makes the shift in mood as well as atmosphere, and additionally evokes curiosity in the reader.

In the second paragraph, Brush utilizes good syntax when she says, “It arrived, in the form a small but glossy birthday cake.” “It” clearly refers to the woman’s “little surprise” for her husband’s birthday, but by the nature of its syntax, the reader gets the implication that what is to be displayed is something more of a birthday surprise. Brush gives a good illustration of the cake and its symbolic nature through imagery: “…[a] glossy, birthday cake, with one pink candle burning in the center.” The simplicity of the cake symbolizes and reaffirms the “simpleness” of the couple. Brush uses descriptive diction of the wife’s “shy pride” over her “little surprise” to emphasize the inconspicuity of this every day couple. Oral imagery is utilized as the speaker describes the “pattering” of applause, implying that even at this point in time, the speaker seems to be the only interested observer of these two nameless people.

Interestingly, in the third and final paragraph, Brush employs the word “you” repeatedly instead of “I”, in order to call attention to the reader that this couple has in fact caught one’s attention. This repeated use of the word “you” accelerates the shift in mood by placing the reader in a state of increasing dismay and deepening curiosity to hear the outcome of the story, which had at first seemed so boring and usual. Brush quickens the pace of the story by using the word “and” after every phrase. Again, Brush is consistent with her simplistic action of the “little” cake, implying that although the couple has now struck the interest of both the speaker and the reader, the couple still remains inconspicuous and plain to everyone in the restaurant. Brush uses alliteration of harsh sounds, “quick, and curt and unkind” to emphasize the harsh nature of the man’s chastisement towards the woman. Brush’s best example of good syntax is when she states, after one long sentence about waiting to look up at the hurt woman, “Not long enough, though.” This abrupt, syntactical strategy emphasizes the sad air of the story and makes a sense of pity and compassion from the reader.

Finally, Brush ends the story by describing the woman as crying “quietly and heartbrokenly and hopelessly, all to herself, under the gay brim of her hat.”

The description of the hat as being “gay” and “big” contrasts with the emotions that the woman is inwardly feeling, and while the image of the hat seemed deception of ostentatiousness before, in actuality, the hat represents the secrecy of the couple’s trouble that is presenting itself in the guise of inconspicuity and plainness. Through these writing strategies, Brush fulfills the purpose of giving the reader insight into one “ordinary, every-day” couple’s lives and pointing out the depressing nature of man’s lack of interest in everyday ordinary people.
Sample B

Sometimes surprises are unwanted, for example one would normally like to do without the surprise that the hot water has run out while in the middle of a shower. However, other surprises can be good and eventually welcomed, as birthday surprises normally are. However, in “Birthday Party” by Katherine Brush, a scene is depicted in which a man is less than happy about a surprise birthday event created by his wife. The author uses irony and informal diction to give the reader a feel for the relationship between the man and the woman and rejected kindness.

Irony is present throughout the passage whenever the birthday is mentioned. When the author first notices what the wife has in store for her husband, she calls it a “little surprise”, the irony that is present here is the fact that it is just a little thing that the wife is doing for her husband, yet it is still too big for the husband’s liking. The “little” thing is actually much larger than is given credit for, possibly due to the relationship that the man and woman share. This emphasizes the author’s purpose of the passage by showing how even the little things she tries to do for him are rejected. Leaving her feeling “heartbroken and hopeless by the end of the event. He became angry at his wife for “embarrassing him” (13) by her “little surprise” (6). The irony continues when the author describes the hat worn by the woman as being a “gay big brim” (21). The irony present here is in that her happy oversized hat is still not enough to hide her from the grim reality of her unhappy relationship with her husband. The author’s purpose is fulfilled here because the reader has a feeling through this oversized hat that the couple’s relationship is a hurtful one to the wife because she is trying to hide under this oversized, good-natured hat from the unkind feelings her husband gives her at even the smallest of surprises. The reader truly gets a feel for the hurtful relationship the two share.

In the second paragraph of the passage, informal diction is used to have the reader feel the relationship between the married couple on a more personal level. Because of the author’s sudden use of “you,” (14) and “I” throughout the passage, the reader feels the same pain the speaker does for the woman at her rejected love toward her husband. The simple switch in diction from a more formal diction to a more informal diction makes the reader feel present at the event and makes the reader feel present at the event and makes the reader go through the event as a spectator just as the speaker did. This gives the reader a good feel for the relationship, and helps the author achieve her purpose.

Because of the author’s use of irony and informal diction, the reader feels the pain of the woman in the relationship shared by the married couple. The simplicity of the surprise is ironic because of the extreme reaction by the husband, and the informal syntax makes the reader feel emotions similar to the speaker and more like a spectator at the event.

Sample C

In this section of Katherine Brush’s short story, it is author’s purpose to create sympathy for the woman. Brush uses a sympathetic outside narrator and touching details to evoke this sympathy from the reader.

The narrator of the passage is someone else at the restaurant, observing the couple, and his or her thoughts and actions influence the reader’s because it is the only view he or she is offered. The narrator describes the woman with sympathetic terms such as “fadingly pretty” and “shy pride”. These descriptions cast a positive light on the woman as just trying to surprise her husband in a loving manner. Many readers will be able to sympathize with such attempts to surprise a loved one, and feel sympathy for the woman.

Other details the sympathetic narrator includes to evoke sympathy for the woman are in the portrayal of the woman’s husband. The narrator says he is “indignant at his wife for embarrassing him (13)”, and also, “you looked at him…and you thought, ‘oh, now don’t be like that!’” (14). Such details about the man seem to indicate that the man is acting horribly to this poor, shy woman who is only trying to please him. There may be another reason why the man is displeased, but the reader only has one point of view to judge from, and so will feel the same sympathy that the narrator feels for the woman.

Thus, Brush’s sympathetic narrator and use of details achieves her purpose to make the readers feel sorry for the woman in her attempt to surprise her husband.