ASSIGNMENT:
Read the following essay prompt and essay grading guidelines. Then, read the student essays. For each student essay, (1) assign a score, and (2) write a short critique (a couple of sentences) in which you state the positive aspects of each essay as well as suggestions for improvement.

2005

Printed below is the complete text of a short story written in 1946 by Katharine Brush. Read the story carefully. Then write an essay in which you show how the author uses literary devices to achieve her purpose. (Suggested time—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 you 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 a 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.

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**2005 AP ENGLISH LITERATURE SCORING GUIDELINE**

*Question #2: Katharine Brush’s “Birthday Party”*

**General Directions:** This scoring guide will be useful for most of the essays that you read, but in problematic cases, please consult your table leader. 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 a 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 the papers 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.

Sample Essays

Sample MM

“The Birthday Party” by Katherine Brush is truly a story with an objective to depict the cruelty of some people in the world. It does not go far enough to explain it; however her descriptions, perspective, diction and syntax portray the husband’s insolence so well that its purpose to induce the reader’s disgust is utterly achieved.

Initiating the short story by introducing her subjects immediately the author describes the couple of no extraordinary people but as merely a married “couple in their late thirties.” She begins by describing simple physical characteristics, and then lets the reader know that it was the husband’s birthday celebration at a restaurant.

Next, the author describes the situation in great detail so as to bring the reader into the shoes of a viewer of the situation. She describes the look of the birthday cake, the sound of the orchestra, the reactions of the patrons in the restaurant—almost so detailed that the reader can hear the clapping and see the lit candle. In this way, the author is able to present a typical situation which any reader can relate to, and bring him/her directly to the scene.

The last paragraph, however, is by far the most significant in assisting and evoking the reader’s disgust. Primarily, the author introduces the pronoun ‘you.’ In this way, the reader is brought even more intimate with the situation at hand; the author realizes that almost every reader would think “Oh, now, don’t be like that!” persuading the reader to keep reading to see what happens next. The next sentence is very important because it portrays a series of events all happening very quickly; and to portray this, the author deliberately uses a run on sentence. She writes, “But he was like that, and as soon as the little cake had been deposited on the table, and the orchestra [finished] . . . and the general attention had shifted. . “ to keep the reader entertained and hoping to see how the husband reacts. Just as the answer is about to be revealed, the author now does something she hasn’t done yet, and this is introduce “I.” The author now introduces “I” because this, again, brings the reader closer to the incident; by doing this, the reader is not only reading about it, but he is reading a personal account of it. She writes that she, “couldn’t bear to look at the woman,” after the husband cruelly said something to his wife because she accidentally embarrassed him, and this puts the reader in the author’s shoes.

The author finishes the third paragraph with potency and by evoking the most sympathy and disgust from the reader. She includes the fragment, “Not long enough, though,” to explain the misfortunate reaction of the wife, crying for a long time for simply trying to please her husband. The last sentence is extremely important because it leaves the reader with a lasting impression of sympathy for the wife and anger at the husband. This sentence includes the wife “crying quietly” (as to not make her cruel husband any angrier), “and heartbrokenly” (for she tried her best to please her husband yet was condemned), “and hopelessly” (as to explain there was no redeeming herself). The wife was “all to herself” because she was emotionally conflicting with her husband. The author then leaves us with the idea that this was meant to be a happy and special celebration, yet she was left sobbing under the “gay big brim of her best hat.”

Although we as a reader do not know the husband or the wife personally, and although only a simple celebration of a birthday party is described, the detailed and fascinating use of description by the author easily places the reader into the author’s shoes, viewing every facial expression, hearing every clap, and smelling the burning candle personally. In this way, the author’s purpose of conveying the husband’s cruelty to the point of evoking much disgust and sympathy from the reader is achieved greatly.

Sample DD

Katharine Brush uses literary techniques in Birthday Party to convey the sense of helplessness an abused person feels in an abusive relationship.

The point of view Brush uses keeps the reader distanced and reserved from the events in the story. The couple’s thoughts are unreachable. The narrator is merely an observer to the situation; a customer in the restaurant. This point of view gives the reader a frustration at the distance between the abused woman and the narrator, as if it were impossible to be other than a removed observer.

Imagery is used to positively describe the pains the wife took to make r husband happy. Even though described as “fadingly pretty” and “shy,” the woman wears a big hat to hide what she may lack in appearance. And when the cake comes out, “she beams with shy pride.” And she would be prideful of the present because went through a great deal of effort to order the cake and have the orchestra play “Happy Birthday to You.”

The wife’s hat is used a metaphor for how the abusive relationship affects her. She tries hard to cover up her sadness by putting forth a cheerful demeanor, like putting on her best hat to celebrate not her own, but her husband’s birthday. Yet when her husband criticizes her hardwork, she is crushed inwardly. Her cheer and pride of hard work means nothing after her husband is “indignant” with her. The façade she put on for the benefit of her husband means nothing when she lies
“heartbrokenly and hopelessly” under the “big brim of her best hat.” Neither her actions or the wishes of the narrator have any effect on the husband, which adds the sense of helplessness of the abused wife in a relationship that seems impossible to mend.

Sample EE

In the short story Birthday Party written by Katherine Brush in 1946, she used literary devices to achieve her purpose. Brush uses imagery in line 4 describing the couple, “The man had a round, self-satisfied face, with glasses on it; the woman was fadingly pretty, in a big hat”. This helps to visualize the couple.

When the husband let her have it, she became dissatisfied. “crying quietly” is the wife weeping in small volume. The fact that the “heartbroken” woman hides behind her “gay” (happy) hat is ironic.

Sample NN

As clichéd as it is, many times appearances can be deceiving. People are adept at putting on a façade to cover up the true state of their lives, as putting on a happy face even when they are collapsing inside. In her short story, Katharine Brush writes about a seemingly happy incident in which a wife prepares a birthday surprise for her husband. However, the husband’s cruel ingratitude causes the façade of normalcy to collapse, and his wife is left devastated. Through the use of detailed description, anonymity of the characters, and repetition of sounds and phrases, Brush suggests that even songs and birthday cake can’t fix or hide a marriage that is broken inside, and we can’t always put on a smile.

Brush creates a very detailed description of the husband an wife at the restaurant. The man has a “round, self-satisfied face”, and the wife is “fadingly pretty.” As the author suggests, there is nothing out of the ordinary about them. Once the narrator realizes that his is actually an Occasion with a capital O, she begins to notice and describe the details that the wife tried so hard to include. The cake is glossy with a pink candle, and there is an orchestra with both violin and piano. These details suggest the time and effort the wife put into surprising her husband, and it serves to make it all the more pathetic when her husband rejects her. Brush’s use of detail emphasizes that adornment cannot substitute for substance, especially in a relationship.

Another technique Brush employs is anonymity of character. We don’t know anything about the narrator, and the husband and wife have no names. They are simply an average “couple in their late thirties.” This anonymity adds universality to the situation. They are not just a husband and wife; they are every husband and wife who have tried to make their relationship seem happy and gay when it is not. There are few things more painful than making a sincere effort to reach out to someone and getting it thrown back in your face. We have all experienced this, and we project our own experiences onto this hapless wife and feel her pain as our own. At once, we are the creators and observers of a façade that just doesn’t hold up to reality, and this is made possible by the anonymity and universality of the characters.

Another technique Brush utilizes is repetition of particular phrases and sounds that add pathos to the wife’s situation. Her plans are constantly referred to in a pejorative (“Little surprise”, “Little cake”, etc.) making them seem like they lack importance, when really, they were everything to the wife. Though the surprise is little, she “beam(s) with shy pride.” The repetition of “little” foreshadows the husband’s cruel rejection later in the story and his lack of respect for wife’s efforts. Another place repetition is very effectively employed is in the last sentence of the story. Brush uses alliteration when she describes the wife crying “under the gay big brim of her best hat.” It is truly pathetic that the wife went to the effort to get dressed up fancy for her husband’s birthday, only to be reprimanded for it. The repetition of the B sound almost sounds like someone crying to themselves as their lips quiver, adding to the pain of the wife. Her efforts to add romance and fun to an already dead relationship blew up in her face.

Marriages and relationships in general can be destroyed by a lack of respect and sensitivity. Though we do not know the circumstances of the husband and wife’s relationship, his utter cruelty in rejecting her kindness could not have been an isolated event. The public display of the birthday surprise suggests that the wife was trying to convince her herself and the world that she had a healthy marriage, when clearly she did not. Through the use of specific details, anonymous characters, and repetition, brush shows that appearances really can be deceiving.

Sample YY

In the story, Birthday Party, the author achieved her purpose by using literary devices.

When the man was described as being “round-faced” and “self-satisfied” it made me dislike him instantly. He sounded like an arrogant aristocrat who believes he is better than anyone else. The woman who was married to him was “fadingly pretty, in a big hat” also sounded like an arrogant aristocrat at first. It made me think of someone who is no longer beautiful, but wants to maintain the guise of being a young beauty. When I learned that she was surprising him with a cake for his birthday I realized that I had underestimated the woman. This small thing gave her character some depth and made her seem more kind. If she had been arrogant she would have thrown him a huge party or simply told him to pick out his own gift. Since she was pleased, but he seemed embarrassed it proved that he thought himself too good for a simple gesture like the cake. When he muttered at her under his breath and made her cry it demonstrated that he thought a birthday cake was
childish and unworthy of him. He may have also believed that getting older could be avoided by not celebrating and that being old would be seen as a weakness among his friends and colleagues. When she cried he showed that he was heartless and undeserving of such endearments by not comforting her.

The literary devices make you feel sorry for the woman and indignant at the husband.

**Sample PP**

In “Birthday Party,” a wife in her late thirties hopes to surprise her husband with a glossy cake as a symbol of her love. However, the husband reacts with embarrassment and anger. The author, Katharine Brush, makes the reader feel disgusted by the man’s heartlessness. Brush asserts that these small gestures of affection are of the greatest importance, and represent a potential heartbreak.

The first section of the passage creates an inconspicuous scene which is interrupted by the sweet surprise the wife has planned for her husband. The narrator uses the words “unmistakenly married” to describe the couple’s relationship. They seem ordinary at first, as does the story. However, by capitalizing “Occasion,” Brush reveals that this dinner has a special significance. Although the cake is small, it is also glossy. This description conveys that despite the surprise seeming small, it is entirely genuine. The narrator’s intimate description of the event draws the reader into the story. One cannot help but smile when the wife “beams with shy pride over her little surprise.” In other words, the poignant and sweet tone of the cake scene endears the reader to the wife. Her gesture is one of genuine, heartfelt affection. Brush employs a light but honest tone in creating a mood of endearing love for the reader.

As a result, when the husband responds with cruelty, the reader actually hates him for not acknowledging his wife’s affection. The volta comes when the narrator expresses the husband’s obvious displeasure. The word “Instead” seems to reveal that the husband’s reaction is the opposite of what one expects. Again, Brush draws the reader into the narrator’s disappointment with the repetition of “you.” Additionally the wish of the narrator is an example of understatement. Therefore, Brush enhances the reader’s anger at the husband. When describing the husband’s nasty whisper, the narrator’s words mirror the husband’s tone: they are short and harsh, involving hard consonants. The reader can’t bear to look at the wife along with the narrator because the experience seems somehow all too common, the pain too familiar. Brush ends with an ironic juxtaposition that highlights the despair of the wife. The dinner should have been happy and gay like her hat. Instead, the young woman is crying under it, “heartbroken and hopeless.” A seemingly harmless and loving gesture has tremendous implications. The wife seems “all to herself,” a subtle foreshadowing that their marriage will never be the same. Her husband has pointlessly caused irreparable emotional damage only because of his selfish fear of receiving public attention. By ending with “her best hat,” Brush emphasizes the sincerity of the woman’s attempt to surprise her husband. The reader finds himself absolutely disgusted by the husband.

Brush believes that these seemingly small gestures have the utmost importance. When the narrator witnesses along with the reader the husband’s rejection of his wife’s sincere affection, the tragedy of such heartlessness is clear.

**Sample BBB**

The story starts out in a fancy tone. The way both couples were described, the restaurant and the way the man looked when his cake came. I think her purpose was to make the reader feel sorry for the women who is trying so hard to please her husband.

She uses her word choice very carefully to describe her characters. “the wife beamed with shy pride”. These words shy and pride usually do not go right next to each other. The author uses these words for the wife because it explains that she probably dose not do these little thing for her husband often. She’s shy because she is unsure how he will react.

The imagery the reader gets in their head is very vivid. I can almost see the couple sitting there; him “hotly embarrassed” and her with “shy pride”. The author uses very descriptive words which helps the reader to picture what is going on, in their head.

Using quotation in the middle of the story was a great idea. That was what I was really thinking and it was nice to have had it said.

In the beginning it talks about the women begin fadingly pretty and wearing a big hat. The author then brings up the big hat again but not until the very end. But instead of it being something pretty she uses it to hide herself. Her hat is a metaphor for how she feels. In the beginning she feels pretty and proud, and her hat is standing tall and is a beautiful hat. Then in the end she has become heartbroken and has become smaller, just like her hat.

**Sample KK**

In her short story, “Birthday Party”, author Katharine Brush uses pedestrian diction and simplistic imagery to convey her disapproval for the patriarchal traditions of society and for the lack of appreciation of a wife by her husband.
Brush’s diction is not overly elevated or complex. She creates a common scene of an “unmistakably married” couple celebrating “the husband’s birthday.” The husband wears “glasses” and the wife is “fadingly pretty.” By using such descriptions, Brush makes the situation average and common. The couple becomes an appropriate manifestation for a typical American couple. Thus, as the story progresses and the reader is presented with a cruel and unappreciative husband, the situation serves as a criticism of a male-dominated society. The “hotly embarrassed” husband says something “punishing” and “unkind” to his wife. The man is cruel to the woman. He intentionally hurts her because his own pride has been damaged. The mistreated wife resists to “crying quietly and heartbrokenly and hopelessly” to herself. Her “indignant” and dominating husband cannot show love to anyone except for himself. He is the alpha-male, “self-satisfied” and full of pride. Brush criticizes the traditions of male-dominance by generating disgust for the husband and sympathy for the wife.

Complimenting her rather simplistic diction is Brush’s use of common imagery. She does not trouble herself (or the reader) with lengthy metaphors or allusion. Instead, she describes the “little narrow restaurant” and the small cake with “one pink candle” in a very real fashion. This enables the reader to better relate to the situation taking place. The restaurant is average, and the couple traditional and common. Again, by making the situation universal, Brush is able to point out the flaws in a male-dominated society.

Sample O

Katherine Brush’s “The Birthday Party” is a short story about a wife’s birthday surprise for her husband gone terribly wrong. By the end of the story, the reader is left quite sympathetic of the woman. To achieve this effect, the writer uses diction, imagery, structure, and characters’ actions.

Brush is a quite descriptive in creating her restaurant scene, employing a wide array of words to present setting, character, and action. With words such as “unmistakably married,” “shy pride,” and “hotly embarrassed,” the reader’s attention is focused exactly when and where the author wants the reader to notice or feel something a certain way.

The description of the story also creates vivid imagery. The entire first paragraph presents such a well-formulated description of the couple sitting at the table in the restaurant that one can almost reach out and touch them. In the final scene, the woman’s heartbreak is so apparent and so real that the reader can feel genuine pity for her.

The narrator, although no significant figure by any means in the birthday story whatsoever, nonetheless plays an integral role in conveying the mood of the room surrounding the couple. When the narrator sees the man reprimand the woman, he or she instantly thinks, “don’t be like that!”—a sentiment that is also generated in the reader. The narrator is then forced to look away, and sees the woman is still crying when he or she looks up again, further emphasizing a strong sense of pity.

Finally, the very structure of the story enhances its meaning. Although only three paragraphs in length, the story brings us full circle with a build-up to a climactic point and drops into a tragic ending. The tale builds up with happy images of a couple and warm feelings generated with the birthday surprise. However, the husband’s quiet remarks and the woman’s quiet tears cause the story to collapse on itself into pity and melancholy.

Such a short story cannot easily have such a strong effect on a reader as “The Birthday Party.” Katharine Brush is able to achieve such an impact with her careful employment of literary devices turning a joyful situation into a heartwrenching tragedy.

Sample H

One very overused saying in the US is “Things aren’t always what they seem”, and I think that this well-known saying describes the idea of Katharine Brush’s short story. Her use of metaphor, along with other techniques, shows just how things aren’t always what the seem.

The story starts of in a happy, light-hearted manner, describing a charming married couple. The man’s description, “round, self-satisfied face” (line 3) and the woman’s description, “fadingly pretty, in a big hat” (line 3) tell us some much about them. The imagery used to convey physical descriptions of these two also creates character descriptions. The “self-satisfied face” gives off an impression of arrogance and pulls the reader back from the man. The woman, on they other hand, pulls the reader in. Her pretty appearance is inviting & her big hat is really just a metaphor for her heart. She’s a very kind hearted woman whose eager to please. She is later on said to have “beamed with shy pride” (line 10), which also adds to her warmth. She is so simple and kind that she wouldn’t even hurt a fly.

Another technique is the tone shift. The story goes from a happy birthday surprise to an angry word ending in tears. The shift comes at line 11 when the narrator says, “It became clear at once that help was needed, because the husband was not pleased”. This is surprising, since most people would enjoy a birthday surprise. The original description of the husband was a foreshadow of how his character would come out later.
Needless to say the heart-broken & teary wife gets blamed by the husband. She is sad and now embarrassed herself. The last lines really show the woman’s characters through the use of metaphor, “Crying quietly and heartbrokenly and hopelessly, all to herself, under the gay big brim of her best hat.” (lines 20-21).

The couple that seemed so happy and perfect is now torn apart and weeping. Brush has certainly shown that things aren’t always as they seem, but also that some things never change. Whether she is “fadingly pretty” in it, or crying “under the gay big brim” the woman still had her big heart & that never changed.