

Name _____ Hr. _____

CHARACTER AND SETTING ANALYSIS MODEL PASSAGE

Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition: Question 2/1992

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

In the following excerpts from the beginning and ending of Tillie Olsen's story "I Stand Here Ironing," a mother's reflections are prompted by another person's concern about her daughter. Read the passage carefully. Then write an essay in which you analyze the narrative techniques and other resources of language Olsen uses to characterize the mother and the mother's attitudes toward her daughter.

I stand here ironing, and what you asked me moves tormented back and forth with the iron.

"I wish you would manage the time to come in and talk with me about your daughter. I'm sure you can help me understand her. She's a youngster who needs help and whom I'm deeply interested in helping."

"Who needs help."...Even if I came, what good would it do? You think because I am her mother I have a key, or that in some way you could use me as a key? She has lived for nineteen years. There is all that life that has happened outside of me, beyond me.

And when is there time to remember, to sift, to weigh, to estimate, to total? I will start and there will be an interruption and I will have to gather it all together again. Or I will become engulfed with all I did or did not do, with what should have been and what cannot be helped. She was a beautiful baby. The first and only one of our five that was beautiful at birth. You do not guess how new and uneasy her tenancy in her now-loveliness. You did not know her all those years she was thought homely, or see her poring over her baby pictures, making me tell her over and over how beautiful she had been - and would be, I would tell her - and was now, to the seeing eye. But the seeing eyes were few or nonexistent. Including mine.

I nursed her. They feel that's important nowadays. I nursed all the children, but with her, with all the fierce rigidity of first motherhood, I did like the books then said. Though her cries battered me to trembling and my breasts ached with swollenness, I waited till the clock decreed.

Why do I put that first? I do not even know it matters, or if it explains anything.

She was a beautiful baby. She blew shining bubbles of sound. She loved motion, loved light, loved color and music and textures. She would lie on the floor in her blue overalls patting the surface so hard in ecstasy her hands and feet would blur. She was a miracle to me, but when she was eight months old I had to leave her daytimes with the woman downstairs to whom she was no miracle at all, for I worked or looked for work and for Emily's father, who "could no longer endure" (he wrote in his good-bye note) "sharing want with us."

I was nineteen. It was the pre-relief, pre WPA world of the depression. I would start running as soon as I got off the streetcar, running up the stairs, the place smelling sour, and awake or asleep to startle awake, when she saw me she would break into a clogged weeping that could

not be comforted, a weeping I can hear yet.

.....

She is so lovely. Why did you want me to come in at all? Why are you concerned? She will find her way.

She starts up the stairs to bed. "Don't get me up with the rest in the morning." "But I thought you were having midterms." "Oh those," she comes back in, kisses me, and says quite lightly, "in a couple of years when we'll all be atom-dead they won't matter a bit."

She has said it before. She believes it. But because I have been dredging the past, and all that compounds a human being is so heavy and meaningful in me, I cannot endure it tonight.

I will never total it all. I will never come in to say: She was a child seldom smiled at. Her father left me before she was a year old. I had to work her first six years when there was work, or I sent her home and to his relatives. There were years she had care she hated. She was dark and thin and foreign-looking in a world where the prestige went to blondness and curly hair and dimples, she was slow where glibness was prized. She was a child of anxious, not proud, love. We were poor and could not afford for her the soil of easy growth. I was a young mother, I was a distracted mother. There were the other children pushing up, demanding. Her younger sister seemed all that she was not. There were years she did not want me to touch her. She kept too much in herself. My wisdom came too late. She has much to her and probably little will come of it. She is a child of her age, of depression, of war, of fear.

Let her be. So all that is in her will not bloom - but in how many does it? There is still enough left to live by. Only help her to know - help make it so there is cause for her to know - that she is more than this dress on the ironing board, helpless before the iron.

SCORING GUIDE FOR "I STAND HERE IRONING"
1992 AP LIT Q2

General directions: This scoring guide will be useful for most of the essays you read, but for cases in which it seems inadequate, consult your Table Leader. 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 an exceptionally 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 a 3.

9-8 These well-written essays clearly demonstrate an understanding of the characterization of the mother and her attitudes toward her daughter. They recognize the complexity of Olsen's presentation of both the mother and the daughter, and they deal specifically with narrative techniques (such as point of view, time shifts, dialogue, interior monologue) and resources of language (such as repetition, syntax, diction, imagery) employed in the passages. These essays need not be without flaws, but they will be characterized by an understanding of the passage and consistent control over the elements of effective writing. They demonstrate the writer's ability to read with perception and to express ideas with clarity and skill.

7-6 These essays also demonstrate an understanding of the characterization of the mother and her attitudes toward her daughter, but compared to the best essays, they are not as thorough, precise, or aware of complexities. They may deal with fewer narrative techniques and resources of language, and their analysis may be less perceptive or less developed than that of the better essays. These essays demonstrate the writer's ability to express ideas clearly but with less maturity and control than the top papers. Generally, 6 essays present a more limited analysis and less consistent command of the elements of effective writing than essay scored 7.

5 These essays are often characterized by superficiality. They respond to the question without important errors, but they miss the complexity of characterization. Their analysis of techniques and language may be vague or overly generalized. Typically these essays reveal simplistic thinking and/or pedestrian writing. Although the writing is adequate to convey the writer's thoughts, these essays are not as well conceived, organized, or developed as upper half papers.

4-3 These lower half essays attempt to explain the passage, but they do so inaccurately or ineffectively. They may present a misguided or undeveloped analysis of the narrative techniques and language. They may merely paraphrase, omitting the analysis. Generally the writing reveals weak control over such elements as diction, organization, syntax, or grammar. Typically essays scored 3 exhibit more than one of the above problems; they are flawed by weak writing skills, significant misinterpretations, inadequate development or serious omissions.

2-1 These essays compound the weaknesses of essays in the 3-5 range. They seriously misread the passage or fail to respond adequately to the question. Generally these essays are unacceptably brief or poorly written on several counts. They may contain many distracting errors in grammar and mechanics. Although the writer may have made some attempt to answer the question, the views presented typically have little clarity or coherence.

0 This score is for off-topic responses.

- Indicates a blank response.

I Stand Here Ironing
Tillie Olsen

SAMPLE SS
SCORE OF 10

Tillie Olsen's short story "I Stand Here Ironing" uses narrative techniques, repetitious diction, and metaphors to display the mother's attitude that what ever happened in her daughters life was predestined because she was a child of depression, war and fear.

This excerpt is written in first person to get the feeling of the mother towards her daughter. The mother claims that she was a young, poor woman; and she had to go to work because the father "could no longer endure." She was a good mother and did as much as possible for her daughter but wasn't sure if it was worth it as she grew up. She feels that since her (mother's) wisdom came late she was bound to make youthful mistakes. The mother feels that just because she is a "mother" doesn't mean that she should have "the key" to her daughter's life. The mother thinks that her daughter will find her own way and if she wants to feel that everyone will be "atom dead," it is her decision to find out.

The use of diction also contributes to the mother's attitude. The continuous description of her daughter as being "beautiful" fulfills the security that she loves and cherishes her. Yet the mother knew at that time of war, depression and fear, that her "dark" "thin" and "foreign-looking" daughter would not be able to stand up to the man love "blindness" and "dimples." Although a mother usually feels the child is the most beautiful and to the mother "a miracle" she knows that the daughter must "find her own way."

The mother compares her daughter to a dress on the ironing board. She knows that there is still enough will in her daughter to live by, but wants her to know that there is more cause to living. She wants to prove to her daughter that she need not be helpless.

The mother's attitude in "I Stand Here Ironing" towards her daughter is one of extreme love. But she knew that her daughter must find success in her own life by herself and she must overcome fear.

SAMPLE NN
SCORE OF 0

Tillie Olsen's short story, "I Stand Here Ironing," records the "tormented" thoughts of a woman, a mother, as she reflects on her daughter's life. Prompted by another person's concern for her daughter, perhaps a teacher, the mother analyzes the causes of her 19-year-old daughter's present problems and defends her daughter and her own mothering techniques. Olsen's use of narrative techniques and excellent choice of details and diction allow the reader to perceive the mother's character and her protective, loving attitude toward her daughter.

The narrator of the story is the mother herself, a first person omniscient narrator, whose self-analysis and defensive statements about her daughter establish the prevalent attitudes. The first few words of the story—"I stand here ironing" establishes the mother's position and narrator role. She addresses an unnamed, unseen "you" with slight irritation, as the "you" is the person whose words echo in her head—"She's [daughter] a youngster who needs help." The mother then questions and defends her inability to "sift, to weigh," to estimate, to total"—she, continuously addressing the well-intentioned, but misunderstanding "you" accounts for her own short comings many times. A stream of consciousness effect now ensues as the mother recalls her daughter's beauty as a baby and the breastfeeding techniques she followed "as the book said." However, she reverts to addressing the "you" again as she questions "Why do I put that (baby recollections) first?" Although she feels guilt and regret, the mother defiantly defends her necessity to work and leave the baby behind with a woman who didn't see her as a "miracle" at all. The then 19-year-old working mother is defended by the mother remembering herself as she remembers the poverty problems and single-parent struggles she endured. The narrator-mother's thoughts then leave the past and center on a recent dialogue between herself and her daughter, which is loosely organized to establish the feeling of remembering. The last two paragraphs are the mother's perceptive analyses of her own faults and limitations, "I will never total it all," and an accurate explanation of her daughter's cause for problems. The mother reveals that her daughter, as a child, was "seldom smiled at and not loved with a proud love but an anxious love." She then confesses - "I was a young and distracted mother" and that "my wisdom came too late" to help the daughter. Her final conclusion: "Let her be" is most powerful because it is the result of the juxtaposed feelings of guilt and justification that the mother feels as a result of her daughter's problems.

The choice of detail and diction in the story adds tremendously to the image that the reader conjures of the mother and her daughter. The mother feels that she will become "engulfed" by mixed, unsorted feelings concerning her daughter—allowing the reader to sense that she is experiencing distinct inner conflict. The curious, careful description of the breast-feeding and the remembrance that "my breasts ached with swollenness" shows that the mother is a loving, determined mother who has done her best possible. Her recollection of Emily, her daughter "patting in blue overalls" and her ability to remember the exact wording of her baby's father's "leaving note" causes a warm feeling of association from the reader, especially as the time period, "pre WPA world of the depression" is established. Also the mother's sentimental recollections of later years, of her teenage daughter's "dark, thin, and foreign looking" appearance demonstrates her loving and understanding compassion for her daughter and her underprivileged, hard-knock life.

In conclusion, the mother's defensive, protective and loving understanding of her daughter is so effectively brought

out by Olsen's narrative and detail techniques. The final plea - "Only help her know-that she is more than this helpless dress before the ironing board" intensely moves the reader to respond to the mother's situation.

- 9) Like the soil that covers her mother's grave, the girl also has scars that have yet to heal after many years. Her life has pulled her into a never-ending cyclone of reminders of her painful past.
- 10) Yet, as they begin to walk away from the "darkening pond" (548), the mood holds a sense of relief that harm has left and once again the scenery is calm.

"I Stand Here Ironing"

★ Note: These intro. paragraphs were written about the whole story.

- 1) In "I Stand Here Ironing" while the narrator is doing just that, she reminisces about the raising of her first child. She realizes that she doesn't really know her daughter, Emily, and goes through her childhood "to remember, to sift, to weigh, to estimate, to total" why Emily is how she is.
- 2) Through her past experiences in which she left her family, ignored her silent pleas, and forced responsibility on her, Emily's mother shows she has no intention of getting her daughter help.
- 3) The Great Depression, the convalescent home in which she lived, and the second World War were all major settings that shaped Emily's personality, whether positive or negative.
- 4) In a roller-coaster-like fashion, Emily's highs and lows are directly related to her nursery school toddler-hood, convalescent home grade school years, and then finally, her purposeful high school period.
- 5) She enjoys ironing; she feels comforted that she has control over the "dress on the ironing board, helpless before the iron." People are not so easily controlled, and Emily is much "more than this dress" that Momma so easily smooths.