

Exercises for Tutorial 34. Drawing Inferences from Literature

Notes

Instructions: Write notes to answer the following questions. *Type or write in the answer boxes.*

1. What are some important elements of critical thinking?

2. How can literature sharpen our critical thinking skills?

3. Respond to the comment above on "Reading Reasonably." What do you think we can learn about life by reading about people and events that don't resemble what we already know?

4. Have you enjoyed or been moved by a film, book or story about someone in completely different circumstances from yours? Why or why not?

5. Summarize the inferences drawn from this dialogue between the Bennets.

6. Why is it unreasonable to infer much from the fact that Mrs. Bennet addresses her husband by his last name?

7. In your own words, describe what you've learned about Belinda's personality from these four lines.

8. Single out the images or words that gave you your impressions.

9. What kind of character do you think Ishmael will turn out to be: lovable, villainous, or mysterious? Why?

10. If you had to guess, what kind of novel do you think *Moby Dick* will turn out to be: a comedy or a drama? Why?

11. What do we learn about Jim Westcott in those lines?

12. What are the three golden rules for reading closely?

13. Based on the examples, describe what it means to read carefully.

14. Based on the examples, describe what it means to read inquisitively.

15. Based on the examples, describe what it means to read reasonably.

Exercise 1

Instructions: Read the extract below and answer questions about the inferences you can draw from it (regarding plot, character and tone). Your answers can be notes. After working on these answers for at least ten minutes, check the "Feedback" section at the end of this file. *Type or write in the answer boxes.*

NOTE: Your answers will not be "right" or "wrong," the way other quiz answers are "right" or "wrong." This is literary analysis, after all! However, the "Feedback" will include

- a range of reasonable inferences based on the passage
- a few examples of fairly typical misreadings

Misreadings often stem from readers projecting expectations onto the text based on their own experiences and culture, rather than what is actually in the text. Sometimes, too, readers just infer too much! The examples given are intended to help clarify where you might be following a dead end.

NOTE: Dates refer to the date of publication, not necessarily the time when the story takes place.

From "The Yellow Wallpaper," by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1892)

A husband and wife are spending the summer in a country house. The story is told from the point of view of the wife, and written like a diary.

.... There is something strange about the house -- I can feel it.

I even said so to John one moonlight evening, but he said what I felt was a draught, and shut the window.

I get unreasonably angry with John sometimes. I'm sure I never used to be so sensitive. I think it is due to this nervous condition.

But John says if I feel so I shall neglect proper self-control; so I take pains to control myself -- before him, at least, and that makes me very tired.

I don't like our room one bit. I wanted one downstairs that opened onto the piazza and had roses all over the window, and such pretty old-fashioned chintz hangings! But John would not hear of it.

He said there was only one window and not room for two beds, and no near room for him if he took another.

He is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction.

I have a schedule prescription for each hour in the day; he takes all care from me, and so I feel basely ungrateful not to value it more.

He said he came here solely on my account that I was to have perfect rest and all the air I could get. "Your exercise depends on your strength, my dear," said he, "and your food somewhat on your appetite; but air you can absorb all the time." So we took the nursery at the top of the house.

GLOSSARY:

- Her "nervous condition" is her illness
- piazza: the terrace
- chintz: a fabric

Questions for "The Yellow Wallpaper"

1. Why do you think the narrator and her husband have come to this house?

2. What can you infer about John's personality? Why?

3. Do you think they are happily married? Why or why not?

[Click here to check feedback.](#)

Exercise 2

Instructions: Read the extract below and answer questions about the inferences you can draw from it (regarding plot, character and tone). Your answers can be notes. After working on these answers for at least ten minutes, check the "Feedback" section at the end of this file. *Type or write in the answer boxes.*

From "Famine" by Xu Xi (2004)

These are the first paragraphs of the story.

I escape. I board Northwest 18 to New York, via Tokyo. The engine starts, there is no going back. Yesterday, I taught the last English class and left my job of thirty-two years. Five weeks earlier, A-Ma died of heartbreak, within days of my father's sudden death. He was ninety-five, she ninety. Unlike A-Ba, who saw the world by crewing on tankers, neither my mother nor I ever left Hong Kong.

Their deaths rid me of responsibility at last, and I could forfeit my pension and that dreary existence. I am fifty-one and an only child, unmarried.

I never expected my parents to take so long to die.

This meal is luxurious, better than anything I imagined.

My colleagues who fly every summer complain of the indignities of travel. Cardboard food, cramped seats, long lines, and these days, too much security nonsense, they say. They fly Cathay, our "national" carrier. This makes me laugh. We have never been a nation; "national" isn't our adjective. Semantics, they say, dismissive, just as they dismiss what I say of debt, that it is not an inevitable state, or that children exist to be taught, not spoilt. My colleagues live in overpriced, new, mortgaged flats and indulge I to 2.5 children. Most of my students are uneducable.

Back, though, to this in-flight meal. Smoked salmon and cold shrimp, endive salad, strawberries and melon to clean the palate. Then, steak with mushrooms, potatoes au gratin, a choice between a shiraz or cabernet sauvignon. Three cheeses, white chocolate mousse, coffee and port or a liqueur or brandy. Foods from the pages of a novel, perhaps.

My parents ate sparingly, long after we were no longer impoverished, and disdained "unhealthy" Western diets. A-Ba often said that the only thing he really discovered from travel was that the world was hungry, and that there would never be enough food for everyone. It was why, he said, he did not miss the travel when he retired.

I have no complaints of my travels so far.

My complaining colleagues do not fly business. This seat is an island of a bed, surrounded by air. I did not mean to fly in dignity, but having never traveled in summer, or at all, I didn't plan months ahead, long before flights filled up. I simply rang the airlines and booked Northwest, the first one that had a seat, only in business class.

Friends and former students, who do fly business when their companies foot the bill, were horrified. You paid full fare? No one does! I have money, I replied, why shouldn't I? But you've given up your "rice bowl." Think of the future.

I hate rice, always have, even though I never left a single grain, because under my father's watchful glare, A-Ma inspected my bowl. Every meal, even after her eyes dimmed.

Questions for Famine

1. The first statement in the story is "I escape." What do you infer the narrator is escaping from? What details from the story support your inference?

2. What are specific examples of food do you notice in this story? What do these examples show about the speaker's attitude towards food?

3. What can you tell about the speaker's relationship with her parents?

4. Why do you think the author titled this story "Famine?"

[Click here to check feedback.](#)

Exercise 3

Instructions: Read the extract below and answer questions about the inferences you can draw from it (regarding plot, character and tone). Your answers can be notes. After working on these answers for at least ten minutes, check the "Feedback" section at the end of this file. *Type or write in the answer boxes.*

"My Papa's Waltz," by Theodore Roethke (1948)

The poet recollects an episode from his childhood.

The whisky on your breath
Could make a small boy dizzy;
But I hung on like death:
Such waltzing was not easy.

We romped until the pans
Slid from the kitchen shelf;
My mother's countenance
Could not unfrown itself.

The hand that held my wrist
Was battered on one knuckle;
At every step you missed
My right ear scraped a buckle.

You beat time on my head
With a palm caked hard by dirt,
Then waltzed me off to bed
Still clinging to your shirt.

Questions for "My Papa's Waltz"

1. What activity is Roethke describing?

2. Do you think Roethke enjoyed the "waltz"? Why or why not?

3. Describe the parents' personalities, based on what you read here.

[Click here to check feedback.](#)

Exercise 4

Instructions: Read the extract below and answer questions about the inferences you can draw from it (regarding plot, character and tone). Your answers can be notes. After working on these answers for at least ten minutes, check the "Feedback" section at the end of this file. *Type or write in the answer boxes.*

From "A Rose for Emily," by William Faulkner (1892)

The story tells this history of Miss Emily Grierson, elderly resident of a town, from the point of view of one of the townspeople. In this episode, representatives of the town alderman (city supervisors) arrive at her house to explain to her that she needs to pay taxes. She has not paid taxes for years, not since a former mayor decided that her family didn't need to pay taxes.

.... They [the aldermen] could see that the leather was cracked; and when they sat down, a faint dust rose sluggishly about their thighs, spinning with slow motes in the single sun-ray. On a tarnished gilt easel before the fireplace stood a crayon portrait of Miss Emily's father.

They rose when she entered - a small, fat woman in black, with a thin gold chain descending to her waist and vanishing into her belt, leaning on an ebony cane with a tarnished gold head. Her skeleton was small and spare; perhaps that was why what would have been merely plumpness in another was obesity in her. She looked bloated, like a body long submerged in motionless water, and of that pallid hue. Her eyes, lost in the fatty ridges of her face, looked like two small pieces of coal pressed into a lump of dough as they moved from one face to another while the visitors stated their errand.

She did not ask them to sit. She just stood in the door and listened quietly until the spokesman came to a stumbling halt. Then they could hear the invisible watch ticking at the end of the gold chain.

Her voice was dry and cold. "I have no taxes in Jefferson. Colonel Sartoris explained it to me. Perhaps one of you can gain access to the city records and satisfy yourselves."

"But we have. We are the city authorities, Miss Emily. Didn't you get a notice from the sheriff, signed by him?"

"I received a paper, yes," Miss Emily said. "Perhaps he considers himself the sheriff... I have no taxes in Jefferson."

"But there is nothing on the books to show that, you see. We must go by the--"

"See Colonel Sartoris. I have no taxes in Jefferson."

"But Miss Emily--"

"See Colonel Sartoris." (Colonel Sartoris had been dead almost ten years.) "I have no taxes in Jefferson."

GLOSSARY:

- motes: tiny pieces
- pallid: pale
- hue: color, complexion

Questions for "A Rose For Emily"

1. What adjectives, adverbs or other descriptive terms describe Miss Emily? What impression do these create?

2. What do you infer from her reaction to the visitors, and their treatment of her?

[Click here to check feedback.](#)

Exercise 5

Instructions: Read the extract below and answer questions about the inferences you can draw from it (regarding plot, character and tone). Your answers can be notes. After working on these answers for at least ten minutes, check the "Feedback" section at the end of this file. *Type or write in the answer boxes.*

From "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," by Flannery O'Connor (1955)

These paragraphs begin the story of a family's ill-fated trip to Florida.

The grandmother didn't want to go to Florida. She wanted to visit some of her connections in east Tennessee and she was seizing at every chance to change Bailey's mind. Bailey was the son she lived with, her only boy. He was sitting on the edge of his chair at the table, bent over the orange sports section of the Journal. "Now look here, Bailey," she said, "see here, read this," and she stood with one hand on her thin hip and the other rattling the newspaper at his bald head. "Here this fellow that calls himself The Misfit is a loose from the Federal Pen and headed toward Florida and you read here what it says he did to those people. Just you read it. I wouldn't take my children in any direction with a criminal like that a loose in it. I couldn't answer to my conscience if I did."

Bailey didn't look up from his reading, so she wheeled around then and faced the children's mother, a young woman in slacks, whose face was as broad and innocent as a cabbage and was tied around with a green head-kerchief that had two points on the top like rabbit's ears. She was sitting on the sofa, feeding the baby his apricots out of a jar. "The children have been to Florida before," the old lady said. "You all ought to take them somewhere else for a change so they would see different parts of the world and be broad. They never have been to Tennessee."

Questions for "A Good Man Is Hard To Find"

1. What specific reasons does the grandmother give to her son, to persuade him to go to east Tennessee instead of Florida? Why does she actually want to go to east Tennessee?

2. What can you infer from her, based on how she talks to her son and daughter-in-law?

3. How do her son and daughter-in-law feel about her? What can we infer about them?

[Click here to check feedback.](#)

Feedback for Exercise 1

From "The Yellow Wallpaper," by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

1. Why do you think the narrator and her husband have come to this house?
 - **Clues:** John says they are there "*solely on my account*," so that she can regain her strength.
 - **Inferences:** The narrator must have had some kind of illness or breakdown, and they have moved to the house at least in part so that she can recover.
2. What can you infer about John's personality? Why?
 - **Details:** John says she feels a draught when she says she feels there is "*something strange*" about the house; he tells her that she must maintain self-control. He chooses their bedroom because it has better air and more room. He is very "*careful and loving*," and gives her "*special direction*" for everything.
 - **Inferences:** He doesn't seem to have much use for her notions about the house being "*strange*," instead pointing to something practical and real (a draught). He may be a sensible, down-to-earth kind of person.

He seems to take a lot of care of her, giving her a prescription for each hour, making sure she has the right kind of bedroom, telling her what she needs to recover. But this is also pretty bossy, isn't it? She can't "*stir*" without special direction, and can't even choose her own room. He sounds very domineering. When she asks to have the other bedroom, John "*wouldn't hear of it*" -- that makes him

sound as though he didn't even listen to her requests. He sounds also as though he is convinced he knows exactly how to make her better.

He doesn't seem to like conflict or displays of anger, since he tells his wife that she needs to control them.

He tells her that they came to the house "*solely on [her] account*." So he draws attention to the fact that they are doing something for her sake alone; perhaps a bit of emotional blackmail? Or maybe he would like her to be grateful. On the other hand, perhaps they did come to the house only on her account.

3. Do you think the narrator has a good relationship with her husband? Why or why not?

- **Details:** She gets unreasonably angry with him; she "*takes pains to control*" herself before him, and that makes her tired; he chooses everything about her life (bedroom, country house, method of cure etc.) She says also that he is "*careful and loving*," and that she feels "*basely ungrateful*" for not valuing his efforts more. She feels that she gets "*unreasonably angry*" at him.
- **Inferences:** When she tells us that she feels guilty for not being grateful, we can infer that she isn't grateful for his attentions. So she doesn't seem to like his looking after her. Even though the narrator doesn't quite want to admit it out loud, not even to us, she seems to resent the way her husband controls all her choices.

She seems to keep herself secret from him. When she refers to the strange feeling the house gives her, she says that she "*even said so to John*." Even suggests that this was an extreme; it's like saying, "*I went so far as to say so to John*." If telling her husband how she feels about something is an extreme response, they can't communicate well (at least, not about how they feel). Also, she controls herself "*before him, at least, and that makes me very tired*." So she doesn't let him see how she feels; she has to be on her best behavior in his company, and he tires her out. This underlines their lack of communication and acceptance.

She sounds as though she blames herself for her moods. "*I get so unreasonably angry*," she says; also, she tells us that he is "*careful and loving*," and she is "*basely ungrateful*." She also obeys him (when he tells her to control herself, she does; she takes the bedroom that he chooses). Although readers may infer that he is bossy and controlling, she may not quite have fully admitted this to herself.

But, for instance, we can't infer....

(a).... "*Her husband is probably the abusive type. He probably beats her. Maybe he's trying to kill her*." This kind of relationship, in which one party controls the other, certainly reminds us of a type of domestic violence. And this could be such a story. But so far, we don't have any reason to suppose that the husband is anything more than rather bossy and convinced that he knows what's best for his wife, and doesn't listen to her very well.

(b).... "*Maybe she's starting to get these moods because she feels that John doesn't love her anymore... Maybe they used to communicate really well, but now that she's been ill, he's sort of closed off from her and it's making her unhappy*." This is a good example of **speculation**, rather than **inference**. There's an important difference. You **infer** ideas by looking at what is in front of you and asking what these ideas imply. You **speculate** by looking at what is in front of you and making up stories that would fit. The first helps you see

greater depth in the text, but the second just exercises your imagination! Here, we have a speculation as to the narrator's relationship with her husband that has no support in the text at all. We have no reason to suppose that she and her husband used to communicate really well, but don't anymore -- that idea is just invented by the reader.

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Feedback for Exercise 2

From Beloved, by Toni Morrison

1. Who lives in 124 Bluestone Road, where is it, and what are their circumstances?

- **Clues:** Family names (read them carefully!); the address, the date -- they're all indicated.
- **Inferences:** A family of five lives there (at first): Baby Suggs, the grandmother; Sethe, her daughter (actually, daughter-in-law, as it turns out later); and Sethe's three children, Howard, Buglar and Denver.

The house is in Ohio, outside Cincinnati. The starting point for the narrative is 1873.

The family seems to be country people, not wealthy (they do all their own cooking and cleaning, and they live away from the city) but not uncomfortable. A lot of details indicate that the house is quite homey (the kettles of chickpeas, soda crackers) and that Sethe spends a lot of time making it that way.

We know that the house is haunted, and that the townspeople seem to keep clear (note that someone gallops by, a pace *"the local people feel necessary when they pass 124"*) so perhaps the family is quite well-known to their neighbors.

They seem to have known bad times. Baby Suggs' past, we're told, was *"intolerable."* There is a suggestion that at some point, Sethe was very poor (see how she had to pay for the headstone--question (d)). Despite the improvement in circumstances, though, the present still seems full of difficulties and sorrows.

Sethe refers, at one point, to *"one more abolitionist."* Readers who don't know who the abolitionists were will miss an important clue here. Abolitionists were Americans who opposed slavery, and who worked to bring about the abolition of slavery (hence the name). Slavery became outlawed in 1863. Since Sethe has talked to abolitionists, we can assume that slavery has touched her in some way.

Putting all the pieces together -- the terrible hardship this family has endured; the sorrows it seems to have left; the improvement in their circumstances; their country ways of living -- you can infer that the grown-ups, at least (Sethe and Baby Suggs) are probably former slaves.

2. Who is haunting 124 Bluestone Road, and why?

- **Clues:** full of a baby's venom; *"she wasn't even two years old when she died"*; *"for a baby she throws a powerful spell"*; *"no more powerful than the way I loved her"*; *"fury at having its throat cut."* The hauntings disturb the family, but don't seem to horrify them. Sethe thinks about *"one more preacher, one more abolitionist and a town full of disgust."* She remembers the *"baby's blood that soaked her fingers like oil."*

- **Inferences:** The ghost of Sethe's baby daughter haunts the house. The baby died before she was two because her throat was cut, which accounts for her *"palsied fury"* and her haunting. Sethe's comments about the preachers, the abolitionists and the *"town full of disgust"* perhaps refer to the killing (why else would a town be disgusted?). Since she remembers how the baby's blood felt on her fingers, she must have been present at the murder.

3. How does the boys' grandmother react to their running away, and why?

- **Clues:** The second paragraph describes her reaction. She stays on her sickbed; she doesn't raise her head; she can't get interested; she's somewhere between the *"nastiness of life and the meanness of the dead."* Her past and present, we are told, are *"intolerable."* She has had a terrible life.
- **Inferences:** OK, she doesn't seem to care much. But why? Is it hard-heartedness, illness, misery? Not really. Note that she doesn't lie still because she's on her sickbed; in other words, illness isn't preventing her from responding -- something else is. She seems to be in a place where the line between death and life blurs (the dead act out as much as the living, and have as little forgiveness) so we can assume she's not exactly looking forward to a peaceful death (*"death was anything but forgetfulness"*). Think about what death is like for the baby: she remains permanently trapped in her anger at being killed. Maybe Baby Suggs, the grandmother, will remain in her own permanent sorrow.
- **So:** Why doesn't she react? Perhaps she has seen too many bad things to be surprised or moved by her grandsons' running away. She *"couldn't get interested"* in living or dying--maybe she's numb. She also has only a little bit of energy left to her. This too suggests that she's used most of her energy up--perhaps on dealing with the bad things she's endured.

4. How does Sethe pay for the baby's headstone?

- **Clues:** She chooses a headstone to *"lean against on tiptoe, her knees wide open as any grave;" "Ten minutes, he said. You got ten minutes I'll do it for free."* She remembers, *"rutting among the headstones with the engraver."*
- **Inferences:** Sethe paid for the tombstone by letting the engraver have sex with her. (You can infer from this that Sethe did not have any money at the time.)

5. What is the atmosphere of the house, and what details give you this impression?

- **Clues:** spiteful; baby's venom; the pranks include hand prints in the cake, upsetting pots of chickpeas, breaking mirrors, moving the sideboard, soda crackers crumbled on the windowsill; lively spite; every house wasn't like the one on Bluestone Road; outrageous behavior; gusts of sour air; note that local people don't like the house (*a driver whipped his horse into the gallop local people felt necessary when they passed 124*). Who could have thought that one little baby could harbor so much rage? She talks about the baby's palsied fury.
- **Inferences:** The house is haunted, and not pleasantly. Words like *"spite," "venom," "palsied fury,"* suggest that the ghost is angry and wants some kind of revenge. But you also don't get the impression that the family fears for their lives. It's not like a horror movie, where the ghost is about

to start cutting everyone's heads off, one by one. This ghost confines herself to petty revenge (making a mess, breaking things) and "insults." So it's an angry, unhappy, spiteful atmosphere--but not, perhaps, a dangerous one.

But, for instance, we can't infer...

(a)...*"Maybe the baby died because they were poor, and Sethe had to sleep with the engraver to pay for the stone.... Or maybe some kidnapper killed the baby, and stole all of Sethe's money..."*

Actually, we don't know anything about the death of the baby, other than the method. Morrison implies plenty in these few paragraphs, but the novel is hundreds of pages long -- she's going to take her time to tell us the story.

(b)...*"This is a horror story; I'm just waiting for the ghost to start killing them off, one by one."* The murderous ghost is cliché of a modern horror movie, and not necessarily part of the story that Morrison wants to write. We often project our expectations onto what we read (ghost story = supernatural horror story) and it's important to stick to what's in the text. (The horrors in this novel all come from real life.)

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Feedback for Exercise 3

"My Papa's Waltz," by Theodore Roethke.

1. What activity is Roethke describing?

- **Clues:** The father's breath makes the son dizzy, so they are close together; they're moving fast (he hung on "*like death*"); they "*romp*" until the kitchen is a mess; when he misses a step, which he seems to do quite a few times, the father scrapes his son's ear with his belt buckle; he keeps time by beating the boy's head.
- **Inferences:** The whisky breath, the missed steps and the general rough-housing suggest that the father is drunk. Father and son seem to be horsing around dancing in the kitchen, until the son is "*danced*" off to bed. They are making a mess (the pots and pans slide off the shelf) and the son has difficulty keeping up ("*clinging to your shirt*"). The mother doesn't join in.

2. Do you think Roethke enjoyed the "waltz"? Why or why not?

- **Clues:** The boy is dizzied by his father's whisky breath; he hangs on "*like death*," and is still "*clinging*" to his father's shirt when he is waltzed off to bed; he is scraped by the belt buckle while his father beats time on his head.

Because this is a poem, you can also make inferences from the rhythm and sound of the words. Read this poem under your breath, tapping your foot three times in each line to keep the beat ("the WHISKY ON your BREATH / Could MAKE a SMALL boy DIZZY; / Still I hung ON like DEATH / Such WALTZING WAS not EASY.") The rhythm is jolting; it doesn't flow or murmur along, but thumps and bangs with the accent falling hard on the words that carry the beat (bang BANG, bang BANG, bang BANG). The words are mostly short, one or two syllables.

- **Inferences:** You might think that Roethke means us to disapprove of his father. His father does appear to be treating him roughly: the scraped buckle and the too-rough waltzing suggest that he's drunk, and is handling his little son carelessly and hurting him -- not because he is cruel so much as irresponsible. The rhythm does thump along like a drunken man wrecking a kitchen, which underlines that sense of awkwardness and roughness. Perhaps the boy is only clinging out of fear, knowing that if he lets go, he'll fall. (He does say he's hanging on "*like death*," a grim image that suggests desperation.)

Or you might think that Roethke's poem suggests that despite the scrapes, he remembers the waltz fondly. He may cling "*like death*" partly because the waltzing is "*not easy*," but he also is waltzed to bed "*still*" clinging to his father's shirt. His father, it turns out, was putting him to bed; maybe he clung to him also because he was fond of him. They are both "*romping*," and the child can enjoy the romp without having to worry about whether or not it's good parenting!

You may well think that the poem contains both fondness and disapproval. The adult Roethke, who wrote the poem, is probably aware of his father's roughness and carelessness, and makes sure not to ignore details about his father beating his head or scraping his ear. But at the same time, he remembers the devotion of a little boy who didn't mind the scrapes and the thumps on the head, and who clung to the father putting him to bed.

3. Describe the parents' personalities, based on what you read here.

- **Clues:** The father's whisky-breath; his battered knuckle; his missed steps; his romping until the pans slid off the shelf; the palm "*caked hard by dirt*"; the mother who can't stop frowning.
- **Inferences:** The father, we can infer, is drunk (whether habitually or not, we don't know). How did his knuckle get battered? We don't know, but perhaps it was hard work -- or he got in a fight. He does seem to do hard manual work: his palm is "*caked hard*" by dirt, suggesting not just that his hands are dirty, but that they're usually dirty -- the dirt has sort of baked onto the skin. Depending on how you view the poem, he might be an affectionate but irresponsible person, or he might be a bit of a brute.

All we hear about the mother is that her "*countenance / Could not unfrown itself*." That's rather an interesting way to put it. Perhaps she would like to smile, but her face has been frowning so long that she can't manage it. This suggests that she's had hard times, or that the father habitually behaves in a way that makes her frown. (Maybe he does drink all the time.) She doesn't seem to approve of the waltzing, since she frowns and doesn't join in. On the other hand, she doesn't stop it, and Roethke doesn't tell us that she shouts, cries or anything: just frowns. Perhaps she's left out of a male bonding moment....

We can infer that both parents probably don't have much money (along with the caked-dirt hand, they seem to have just the one kitchen shelf with pans on it -- and a kitchen small enough to be disturbed by a man and boy dancing about).

But, for instance, we can't infer....

(a).... "*The father obviously abuses his son*." Anything that sounds like child abuse pushes our buttons. We might therefore assume that because Roethke clearly wants us to see his father as rough and perhaps a bit irresponsible, he means to write a poem condemning child abuse. But the poem doesn't bear this out, and other details suggest that the boy remembered the game fondly.

(b).... *"This is obviously a dysfunctional family, and this guy wants to tell us what it was like so readers don't treat their children in that irresponsible way."* Nothing in the poem really suggests that the poet is trying to teach us a lesson, or draw a conclusion about social evils. He's simply painting a picture; what lessons we learn depend on us.

(c).... "Roethke obviously had a lot of problems with his father." Maybe he did. But poets often write poems in the first person about imaginary situations; equally, they may embellish a memory in order to paint a more coherent or striking picture. We don't read literature just to find out about the authors' lives.

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Feedback for Exercise 4

From "A Rose for Emily," by William Faulkner.

1. What adjectives, adverbs or other descriptive terms describe Miss Emily? What impression do these create?
 - **Adjectives:** *small, fat, in black, [with] thin gold chain... vanishing into her belt, ebony cane [with] tarnished gold head; skeleton... small and spare, obesity, bloated, pallid, fatty, small, dry, cold.*
 - **Descriptive phrases:** *like a body long submerged in water, like two small pieces of coal pressed into a lump of dough.*
 - **Inferences:** Miss Emily is fat, but small. Her *"small, spare"* skeleton makes her relative plumpness look like obesity; she has *"fatty ridges"* in her face, which is like *"dough."* But she is not the stereotype of a jolly, fat grandmother. She looks *"like a body long submerged in water,"* an image of something long dead and decaying; she is *"pallid"* and dressed in black with a black-headed cane.

She seems cold and unresponsive. Her voice is *"dry and cold."* Her eyes don't seem to have any glitter or awareness (*"lumps of coal"* don't glow or communicate any life). No active or outgoing verb is associated with her in this paragraph, did you notice? She *"entered," "looked,"* (in the sense of *"appeared"*) *"stood,"* and *"said"* in her dry, cold voice. She makes no contact with anyone; she doesn't even really look at them -- her eyes *"moved from one face to another."* It's an impersonal image, as if Emily were too detached really to notice the visitors.
2. What do you infer from her reaction to the visitors, and their treatment of her?
 - **Clues:** She repeats over and over, *"I have no taxes in Jefferson. See Colonel Sartoris."* Sartoris is long dead. She does not get angry or anxious, or try to explain anything. She does not respond directly to their explanation, letting them sit in silence long enough for them to be able to hear her watch ticking on its chain. She is not confused; she knows that she has received a letter from someone who perhaps *"considers himself"* the sheriff.

The visitors do not harass her. They have chosen a spokesman who speaks until he comes *"to a stumbling halt."* After they have finished, they don't say anything for a while. They try to explain the situation to a few times. They do not know anything about Sartoris' arrangement with Miss Emily about her

taxes, and say that no written records support it. They need to abide by the rules. They continue to speak to her courteously, and to try to plead with her, rather than get angry with her.

- **Inferences:** This woman, who gives the impression of bloated pallor like a waterlogged corpse, also seems to live in the past. She doesn't seem to accept that her tax-free arrangement no longer exists; she doesn't seem to realize that Colonel Sartoris, whom she must have known quite well, is dead. She doesn't seem angry or wild, but she clearly can't be reasoned with.

The visitors seem rather afraid of her. They have selected someone to do their talking, and he comes to a "*stumbling halt*," suggesting that he stammers and feels uncomfortable. Since Sartoris made no official record of her not being forgiven her taxes, she must have been delinquent for ten years before the town officials came to see her. Why? Miss Emily has done and said nothing; she doesn't threaten them. Perhaps they feel guilty about asking an old woman to start paying tax, or perhaps they are put off by her strange and distant manner. They don't seem to get anywhere in this conversation.

Note too that at one time, she was favored by the mayor who unofficially told her she needn't pay taxes. You can infer three things from this. First, Miss Emily must have been from either a wealthy or important family, or from a very deserving one, to earn such special treatment. Secondly, for the mayor to do someone this kind of favor, the town must have been either very small or very cliquey -- or both. Third, times clearly have changed; the new administration doesn't want to do her these favors, because they want to obey the rules. Perhaps the town has grown, or perhaps the administration wants to put an end to corruption and favoritism (like telling your friends that they needn't pay taxes!)

But, for instance, we can't infer...

(a)... "*Miss Emily is a plump little old lady who can't catch up with modern times, so people let her get away with not paying taxes because she reminds them of the old days.*" One of our modern clichés holds that small, fat old ladies are also kind and motherly. We also remember clichés about kindly old folk who can't keep up with modern technology, but who bake their own cookies and leave their doors open at night just like in the good old days, etc. etc. None of these clichés bear any relationship to the Emily Faulkner describes. Every image and description of her suggests coldness, detachment, even decay (think of the pallor, the black eyes in the doughy face, the bloated body like a corpse). Her non-payment of taxes does not seem to stem from a town's kindness towards a little old lady who's lost in the past, but from the specific gift of a former mayor.

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Feedback for Exercise 5

From "A Good Man Is Hard To Find," by Flannery O'Connor.

1. What specific reasons does the grandmother give to her son, to persuade him to go to east Tennessee instead of Florida? Why does she actually want to go to east Tennessee?
 - **Details:** She tells him that she wouldn't take children into Florida because a notorious murderer is headed towards that state, and that her conscience wouldn't let her put her children in that kind of danger; she also says that the children have already been to Florida, and that he ought to take them to different parts of the world. -- She wants to go to Tennessee to visit people she knows.

2. What can you infer about her, based on how she talks to her son and daughter-in-law?

- **Clues:** She tries to get her son to go where she wants by telling him that he ought to do so, for the good of his children. She is "*seizing at every chance*" to change his mind; she starts "*rattling the newspaper at his bald head*," telling him to "*read here what it says he did to those people.... Just you read it.*" She "*wheels*" around to talk to the daughter-in-law.
- **Inferences:** She doesn't tell him that she wants to go to Tennessee to see her friends. Instead, she tries to make her son go there by telling him he ought to go for the sake of his children. When she tells him that she couldn't "*answer to his conscience*," she is striking a very virtuous pose, isn't she? It's as if she were saying, "*A decent person would never take his children to Florida.*" Her approach to her daughter-in-law is much the same; she tells her that the children ought to be able to see different parts of the world and "*be broad.*"

What do you think of these strategies? You might well see them as quite annoying. The old lady is being very sanctimonious, speaking as though she were motivated only by the urge for the parents to do the right thing by the children, when really she just wants her own way. She's also exaggerating her case a lot, too. She makes a great fuss about the "*Misfit*," as if the presence of one killer in the state of Florida was a death-sentence for any visiting tourist; she also pretends that there's great educational value in going to Tennessee as opposed to Florida, both states in the south-east of the country. It's as if she were distinguishing between going to Rome in Italy, or going to Disneyland!

She seems quite energetic, too. She "*rattles*" the paper at her son; she is "*seizing*" opportunities, rather than just taking them; she "*wheels*" around on her daughter-in-law. Her exaggeration supports this, too; she takes an idea and runs with it.

3. How do her son and daughter-in-law feel about her? What can we infer about them?

- **Clues:** Her son is "*bent over the orange sports section of the Journal*" as she talks, and doesn't even look up. The daughter-in-law doesn't stop what she is doing, or answer her mother-in-law. Neither of them is frowning or grinding teeth or anything. The only descriptions: Bailey is bald; his wife has a broad face as "*innocent as a cabbage*," and a headscarf tied like rabbit's ears.
- **Inferences:** Neither of them seems even to notice her. This suggests that she often behaves like this, often enough that they no longer react to it (if they ever did). Perhaps they have become inured to it. Since she lives with them, they must have developed very thick skins. Bailey doesn't show any signs of changing his mind, does he? It doesn't look like she will get her way, despite her strenuous efforts.

Because these two paragraphs begin the story, we don't yet know enough to determine which is cause and effect here. Perhaps the son and daughter-in-law ignore the grandmother because she is shrill and exaggerates and demands her own way all the time. On the other hand, perhaps she behaves like this because no one ever listens to her, and she is becoming desperate. We might see a clue in the way she uses the children as an argument ploy, however. She insinuates that her son and daughter-in-law are neglecting their children-- either their safety or their education--by going to Florida. This might suggest a rather bossy, self-righteous personality. So probably they have cultivated an indifference to her out of self-defense.... You'll have to read the rest of the story to get a clearer picture! We can already see a dynamic at work here, however.

Bailey is only briefly described, but we can infer a few things about him. He is stubborn; he doesn't react to his grandmother -- and no, they don't go to east Tennessee, but to Florida. He has learned completely to block out his mother's voice and energy.

Bailey's wife has a face that is *"as broad and innocent as a cabbage."* This makes us think of something pleasant, down-to-earth... and a bit stupid, or at least, utterly naive. Her rabbits'-ears headscarf also conjures up an image of a rather child-like, perhaps simple woman. But she doesn't seem timid; she doesn't react to her mother-in-law's scolding.

But, for instance, we can't infer...

(a).... *"This family doesn't respect their elder grandmother, and they should. If they respected her more, she would probably be a much nicer person."* True, no one does appear to respect the grandmother much; but nothing in the story suggests that the son and daughter-in-law ought to show her respect, or that this will be the focus of the story. Readers from many cultures might be rather shocked that a man and his wife could ignore his mother so blatantly--but since O'Connor, the writer, has not yet seemed to focus on this as something to disapprove of, this line of criticism takes us away from the story's themes.

(b).... *"The grandmother is probably afraid that she's becoming a burden on her son, and he doesn't love her anymore; that makes her behave badly. My own grandmother is just the same."* Maybe this fictional grandma resembles yours; maybe not. But nothing in these two paragraphs suggest much about their lives, other than that the grandmother nags and the son ignores her. While it's great to draw parallels between literature and your own experience, remember not to jump to conclusions based on your experience. If a character in fiction reminds you of someone you know, you might easily overlook details about the fictional character and start analyzing the real person. This also will pull you away from the story's themes.

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