Question 2

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

Read carefully the following autobiographical narrative by Gary Soto. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze some of the ways in which Soto recreates the experience of his guilty six-year-old self. You might consider such devices as contrast, repetition, pacing, diction, and imagery.

I knew enough about hell to stop me from stealing. I was holy in almost every bone. Some days I recognize the shadows of angels flopping on the backyard grass, and other days I heard faraway messages in the plumbing that howled underneath the house when I crawled there looking for something to do.

But boredom made me sin. Once, at the German Market, I stood before a rack of pies, my sweet tooth gleaming and the juice of guilt wetting my underarms.

I gazed at the nine kinds of pie, pecan and apple being my favorites, although cherry looked good, and my dear, fat-faced chocolate was always a good bet. I nearly wept trying to decide which to steal and, forgetting the flowery dust priests give off, the shadow of angels and the proximity of God howling in the plumbing underneath the house, sneaked a pie behind my coffee-lid Frisbee and walked to the door, grinning to the bald grocer whose forehead shone with a window of light.

“Now one saw,” I muttered to myself, the pie like a discus in my hand, and hurried across the street, where I sat on someone’s lawn. The sun warred between the branches of a yellowish sycamore. A squirrel nailed itself high on the trunk, where it forked into two large bark-scabbed limbs. Just as I was going to work my cleanest finger into the pie, a neighbor came out to the porch for his mail. He looked at me, and I got up and headed for home. I raced on skinny legs to my block, but slowed to a quick walk when I couldn’t wait any longer. I held the pie to my nose and breathed in its sweetness. I licked some of the crust and closed my eyes as I took a small bite.

In my front yard, I leaned against a car fender and panicked about stealing the apple pie. I knew an apple got Eve in deep trouble with snakes because Sister Marie had shown us a film about Adam and Eve being cast into the desert, and what scared me more than falling from grace was being thirsty for the rest of my life. But even that didn’t stop me from clawing a chunk from the pie tin and pushing it into the cavern of my mouth. The slop was sweet and gold-colored in the afternoon sun. I laid more pieces on my tongue, wet finger-dripping pieces, until I was finished and felt like crying because it was about the best thing I had ever tasted. I realized right there and then, in my sixth year, in my tiny body of two hundred bones and three or four sins, that the best things in life came stolen. I wiped my sticky fingers on the grass and rolled my tongue over the corners of my mouth. A burp perfumed the air.

I felt bad not sharing with Cross-Eyed Johnny, a neighbor kid. He stood over my shoulder and asked, “Can I have some?” Crust fell from my mouth, and my teeth were bathed with the jam-like filling. Tears blurred my eyes as I remembered the grocer’s forehead. I remembered the other pies on the rack, the warm air of the fan above the door and the car that honked as I crossed the street without looking.

“Get away,” I had answered Cross-Eyed Johnny. He watched my fingers greedily push big chunks of pie down my throat. He swallowed and said in a whisper, “Your hands are dirty,” then returned home to climb his roof and sit watching me eat the pie by myself. After a while, he jumped off and hobbled away because the fall had hurt him.

I sat on the curb. The pie tin glared at me and rolled away when the wind picked up. My face was sticky with guilt. A car honked, and the driver knew. Mrs. Hancock stood on her lawn, hands on hip, and she knew. My mom, peeking a mountain of potatoes at the Redi-Spud factory, knew. I got to my feet, stomach taut, mouth tired of chewing, and flung my Frisbee across the street, its shadow like the shadow of an angel fleeing bad deeds I retrieved it, jogging slowly. I flung it again until I was bored and thirsty.

I returned home to drink water and help my sister glue bottle caps onto cardboard, a project for summer school. But the bottle caps bored me, and the water soon filled me up more than the pie. With the kitchen stilling with heat and lunatic flies, I decided to crawl underneath our house and lie in the cool shadows listening to the howling sound of plumbing. Was it God? Was it Father, speaking from death, or Uncle with his last shiny dime? I listened, ear pressed to a cold pipe, and heard a howl like the sea. I lay until I was cold and then crawled back to the light, rising from one knee, then another, to dust off my pants and squat in the harsh light. I looked and saw the glare of a pie tin on a hot day. I knew sin was what you took and didn’t give back.

from A Summer Life, 1990
8 Essays earning a score of 8 effectively analyze how Soto recreates his youthful experience through a careful consideration of rhetorical and structural devices. They are likely to recognize how imagery, diction, or contrast contribute to the development of the narrative. Their prose demonstrates an ability to control a wide range of the elements of effective writing but they are not necessarily flawless.

7 These essays fit the description of essays that were awarded 6 points, but they employ more complete analysis or more mature prose style.

6 Essays that earned 6 points adequately analyze the ways Soto recreates his experience. Typically they discuss rhetorical and/or structural elements (such as diction or imagery or contrast) that contribute to the essay's effect, but their discussion of these elements may be not completely developed or cogent. A few lapses in diction or syntax may be present, but the prose of these essays generally conveys writers' ideas clearly.

5 Essays earning a score of 5 analyze strategies used by Soto to recreate his experience, but their development of these strategies is limited or inconsistent. The focus of these essays may be shallow. A few lapses in diction or syntax may be present, but usually the prose in these essays conveys writers' ideas more or less clearly.

4 Essays earning a score of 4 inadequately respond to the task. Their analysis of strategies is limited in accuracy or purpose. They may misunderstand the contrast between the adult and child or paraphrase the narrative more than analyze it. The prose of these essays may convey the writer's ideas adequately, but may also suggest immaturity in terms of control over organization of ideas, diction or syntax.

3 These essays meet the criteria for those that scored 4, but are less able to integrate strategies with narrative, or are less consistent in their control over the elements or writing.

2 Essays that earned a score of 2 demonstrate little success in analyzing how Soto recreates his experience. They may pay little attention to structural or rhetorical techniques or misunderstand their use. They may simply paraphrase the narrative or speculate about Soto's experience rather than analyze it. The prose of these papers often reveals consistent weaknesses in writing, a lack of development and organization, and grammatical problems or lack of control.

1 Essays earning a score of 1 meet the criteria for those that earned 2, but in addition are especially vague in their connections between narrative and analysis, or weak in their control over elements of language.

0 Indicates an on-topic response that receives no credit, such as one that merely repeats the prompt.

- Indicates a blank response or one that is completely off-topic.

Sample Essays and Comments

Excellent response (1)

In the front yard of an ordinary suburban house in the bored air of summer, a six year old imagined the loss of his innocence and purity rolling away like a glaringly empty pie tin. Thus is born the humorous, self-analytical narrative by Gary Soto, a piece somewhat mocking the conventions of childhood morality and religion, contrasting the conflicting message youth receives in these early years of growth and development. God in the plumbing, a dead father, moralistic neighbors and nuns — these were the central figures of Gary Soto’s early life, driving him to his “sin” and his great emotions resulting from such a loss of innocence and confusion in authority.

“Holy in almost every bone,” nearly two hundred of them in that “tiny body . . . [off] . . . three or four sins,” young Soto “knew enough about hell to stop . . . from stealing.” Yet he succumbed to the boredom of the lazy, still, oppressive summer air, ignoring his God which howled in the plumbing and angels which left shadows upon the backyard grass. In a tale swiftly paced and laced with imagery of guilt and redemption, the two conflicting standards of morality embedded firmly in the young man of routine suburbia, Soto recounts images of a boy who cried while divulging in the heady pleasures of the forbidden (his temptuous apple pie, “slop . . . sweet and gold-colored in the afternoon sun,” cried as he tasted the forbidden entity of sin, the very “evil” to which Adam and Eve had fallen.

Driven by temptation, Soto relays a “gleaming” world of temptations — gleaming sweet tooth, sweet, glistening pie, shining forehead (“a window of light” indeed) of the grocer who lost that pie of temptation, that sweetness and “finger-dripping” exultation of taste, and the glaring, squinting pie tin, empty and violated in the hot sun. Thus this repetition of gleaming
delights illustrate both the glory of the forbidden sin and the dominant guilt in the face of such defiance of his previous religious devotion to the domineering and angry God of the water pipes. Here was the glorious delight of a pie which was clawed and pushed into the “cavern” of a greedy mouth, and here also lay the cold, dusty pangs of remorse, remorse which dripped down underarms as “the juice of guilt,” and seeped out in tears at the recollection of the grocer, and lay “sticky with guilt” on the face. In such a state of both pleasure and regret, Soto would forlornly fling his frisbee, the very “coffeeid” frisbee which covered and obscured that sweet, perfume-like sticky exultation, flinging it with “its shadow like the shadow of an angel fleeing bad deeds.”

Thus Soto himself was that angel fleeing his bad deeds, masked in shadow and deceit. The momentary sweetness of gorging, despite the pangs of greed, is lost in the “cool shadows” of the basement where Soto seeks refuge from the remorse so ardently yet restlessly felt. Listening to God’s howl, the words of his dead father, Soto lays cold until redemption settled.

“Crawl[ing] back to the light, rising from one knee, then another, to dust off my pants and squat in the harsh light,” he rises in resurrection, triumphing over evil and sin much like a savior Himself would, exalted no more from lust and greed, but from courage in the face of sin, that glaring, devoured pie tin, ravaged in a feast of the senses, a feast in which morality began to be determined by one’s own self, not the howling God of the drain pipes.

Comments: This response combines a rich and apt analysis of narrative techniques used in the passage with careful connections between devices and the writer’s purpose. This writer demonstrates understanding of Soto’s adult view of his childhood self and focuses on understanding on exploring the humor and self-reflection in the piece. The voice is powerful and authoritative, the organization organic, and the syntax and diction are impressively controlled.

Excellent response (2)

See this ink? It came from a black Pilot Precise V5 pen — my favorite. I stole it. Minutes before this A.P. Exam began, I ripped it off. Right out of someone’s open locker. Now I’m burning with guilt. Thus I take special note of this excerpt from Gary Soto’s A Summer Life. In this passage, the author recalls a boyhood experience which left him feeling guilty as sin. The author uses both diction and imagery to recreate vividly for the reader just how he felt that day when he was six years old, and he stole a pie.

The author uses imagery to bring about a clear recreation of the events on that fateful day. Almost immediately, the author is confronted by the rack of pies at the German Market. It’s not just food there in front of him; these pies are speaking to us, tempting us, beckoning. The author creates the whole image with all the details. The nine varieties, the grocer’s forehead, the hum of the fan overhead. We can almost see the sweatstains appear under his arms, almost hear the breath go in and out. The image lingers through the whole paragraph, and returns later, almost to remind us how oppressive the temptation had been. Again, the writer uses imagery that appeals to the reader’s subtle sympathies, for when the boy abandons with the pie, he finds himself leaning on a car’s fender. Now he’s a fugitive, hiding between cars. We’ve seen this before, a thief hiding in the sewers, a junkie crouched in an alleyway. Don’t we all wait until we’re out of site before we pick our noses or zip up our flies? The escape of the boy is much like the stealthy moves of someone who has broken the law. Another notable use of imagery is Soto’s allusion to the video the nun showed him. Even those of us who didn’t go to Jesuit schools can recall times when our most deep, engrained morality was pressed upon us by T.V. The image of the boy, sweating once again, six years old, horrified face lit by the blue flickers of a movie reel, is provocative for all of us who can relate to it.

The author also utilizes diction to convey his impression of the events that day. The sweat in his armpits is not perspiration, but “the juice of guilt.” Chocolate pie is his “dear fat-faced” friend, suggesting that it might smile, or even wink at him. Every part of his body is magnified in its characteristics: the “skinny legs,” the “cavernous” mouth, each of “200 bones” in his body. This detailed diction brings the day to life for us. “Cross-Eyed Johnny” is the perfect name for an accomplice by association. The “gold chunks” of “slop” illustrate that this pie was an experience to be had. Every word conjures up vivid images.

The diction and the imagery of Gary Soto’s passage serve a common purpose. They resurrect the day. They bring it back to us in such vivid illumination that we can’t help but feel sympathy because we know the torture he went through and we can relate his paranoia to our own. I’m glad this essay is through with — I gotta return this pen to its rightful owner!
Comments: The opening to this essay suggests how the writer will use vivid personal style and humor to analyze Soto’s experience. Its originality is equalled by its deep understanding of Soto’s childhood motives and adult narration. The writing is at once personal and analytical. Choosing to comment primarily on diction and imagery, the writer convincing demonstrates how these elements serve to resurrect the memory of the day and how they link Soto’s experience to the writer’s own. This essay illustrates the variety of possibilities among excellent responses.

Inadequate response

One of the Ten Commandments says “Thou shall not steal.” This is one commandment that nearly every person in the world today has broken at some point of his or her life.

In his autobiography Gary Soto explained how he felt after stealing a piece of pie. Soto used great detail in explaining how he ate the pie and how the people around him acted. Soto like any other person who had just stolen something felt that every one around him knew he had stolen the pie. Soto says his mom knew, his neighbour knew and most importantly he knew himself that he stole a pie. The one feeling everyone gets after taking something they shouldn’t have is guilt.

In recalling his experience Soto never mentioned that he was sorry for what he did. Instead we hear him say that the best things in life came stolen and he ate the pie with little worry at all.

Stealing is a sin but people do it all the time. People know stealing is wrong but yet there are many people like Soto who when they want something go and take it. I guess when you are a 6 yr. old kid who wants a pie you will take it and not realize that you did something wrong until you get older.

Comments: This essay demonstrates some understanding of the narrative and the reasons for Soto’s recreation of his experience, but does not attempt to link the experience to the stylistic or rhetorical elements of the passage. Like other less successful essays written on this question, this response gets sidetracked from confronting the elements of language in the episode Soto recounts, in this case by the issue of retribution for the sin of stealing. The language and organization in the response, while simple, are adequate, which illustrates how accessible the question was even to less well-prepared students.

Question 3

Commentary

Question 3 asked students to formulate an argument that “defends, challenges or qualifies” critic Lewis Lapham’s assertion about the symbolic importance of wealth in America. Lapham argues that for Americans money is the “currency of the soul” as opposed to the more intangible values of social class, honor, or intellect that he finds promoted in European countries.

The passage is long and complex, much more than simply a prompt for taking a position to argue from, but writers wrote longer than usual essays in response, reflecting perhaps the interest the topic generated in them. Even the least skillful papers demonstrated some understanding of Lapham’s position, though they often simplified it or did little more than paraphrase the text. Somewhat better responses identified issues but exhibited uneven development in making their arguments, or provided limited evidence to support their contentions.

Successful essays understood how to use evidence from experience or reading to create an argument of their own. They made their case with skill and conviction. Their approaches varied from employing personal narratives, to making analogies with a host of examples from Jay Gatsby to Herbert Spencer, to critical analysis of Lapham’s own logic. These essays persuaded, through their own rhetorical choices, convincingly and eloquently.

Scoring Guide

Points:

9 Essays earning a score of 9 meet all the criteria for papers that earned 8 points and, in addition, are particularly persuasive or carefully reasoned or demonstrate impressive stylistic control.

8 Essays that earned a score of 8 persuasively defend, challenge, or qualify Lapham’s assertions about the American “faith in money.” They present cohesive and carefully reasoned arguments using appropriate evidence from their knowledge and/or experience to develop their positions. Their prose demonstrates their ability to control a wide range of the elements of effective writing, but they are not flawless.

7 Essays earning a score of 7 fit the descriptions of essays that received 6 points but are distinguished by fuller or more purposeful argument or stronger prose style.