

THE BIRTHDAY PARTY

by Katharine Brush (*The New Yorker*, 1946)

They were a couple in their late thirties, and they looked unmistakably married. They sat on the banquettes 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 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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Directions:

1. Underline all "facts" (evidence) in the essay below.
2. Circle all commentary (interpretation, opinion, explanation).
3. Find at least three examples where evidence and commentary coexist and complement each other in the same sentence. Identify with a check mark in the margin.
4. Find three examples of colons to introduce evidence. Put brackets around the sentences.
5. (a) Explain the purpose of the semicolons at the end of the fourth paragraph.
(b) What does the parallelism in the last paragraph emphasize?
6. Write an additional sentence(s) connecting the irony mentioned in the thesis to other appropriate points in the essay.

SAMPLE STUDENT ESSAY*

In "The Birthday Party," the private emotions of an inconspicuous couple burst momentarily into public view. From the point of view of an observer, the reader sees the circumstances which ignite the emotional tension. More significant, however, is the ironic way that the narrator's observation point prepares the reader for the conflicting responses of husband and wife.

In fact, the narrator's first impressions of the couple are remarkably sound without his realizing their validity. The husband's face is classified as "self-satisfied" with the clear implication of an egotistical and possibly arrogant character behind it. The wife, on the other hand, is extremely feminine and both fragile and meek. She is "fadingly pretty," an indication that she is like a beautiful piece of fragile china somewhat marred by age. In addition, when the cake is presented and the birthday song is played, the wife is pictured as beaming with "shy pride." These details clearly stress the subdued nature of her character. The occasion is a sentimental one for her, yet her emotions in responding to her prepared surprise are not excessive.

Her husband's reactions to her "little surprise" are excessive: he is "hotly embarrassed" and "indignant" at his wife for embarrassing him. In his reaction there is something cruel -- something sadistic -- for when he feels affronted by her public display of the occasion, he deliberately hurts her with a statement described as "punishing . . . quick and curt and unkind." Thus the overwhelmingly powerful emotional response of the husband crushes the meek, shy fragility of the wife.

Her emotions pour forth in tears only when she is terribly hurt by his actions and words. Yet her tears are fully understandable: what she had intended as a sentimental tribute to her husband has turned into a bruising emotional nightmare. The narrator describes this painfully ironic reversal in the last sentence: ". . . crying quietly . . . under the big brim of her best hat." She is not big but beaten; she is not gay; the word "best" may be applicable to her hat but not to her life.

That "gay big brim" is a cover-up, a symbol perhaps of a hopeless attempt by the wife to conceal the basic incompatibility of two people whose characters and emotional make-up are vastly different. The story as presented through the observer is thus a conflict between her fragile meekness and his hard-heartedness, her sentimentality and his cold fury, her feeble attempt to please him and his sadistic desire to crush her. Behind this incompatibility there must be a long untold series of similar expressions of arrogance by the husband, who apparently knows that there is one person whom his ego can dominate. He can even defeat a birthday party.

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* not a perfect essay

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Intellectual Habits for Analysis

Concern for evidence	(How do you know that? Proof?)
Viewpoint	(Whose perception is it?)
Cause and Effect	(What led to it? What else happened? Why?)
Hypothesizing	(What if? Supposing that?)
Significance	(Who cares? Why? So? So what?)

Avoid the use of “obviously” in essays.

obvious to whom?

obvious = no need to restate it

Merely stating that “it’s obvious” does not remove the need to prove it. Don’t think that saying “it’s obvious” is proof of anything.

Avoid the passive voice.

Strong writing uses **strong** verbs.

“The most important word in a sentence is the verb. If I’m having trouble with a sentence, I change the verb until I find a strong verb.”

--Terry Kay, author of To Dance with the White Dog

Sometimes passive voice is necessary if the agent of the action is unknown or unnecessary to the explanation (and would make the sentence verbose and involved). Passive voice leads students to create sentences that they believe to “sound educated” but are empty of content.

Students hide behind passive voice construction to obscure their lack of knowledge.

Sometimes passive voice is useful to style to emphasize dependency, passivity, or weakness. See the explanation in Elements of Style.

Parallel structure is a device, not just a grammatical term.

Parallel structure creates emphasis.

Parallel structure creates formality.

Parallel structure creates dramatic conviction.

Parallel structure creates seriousness.

“The purpose of parallelism, like the general purpose of imagery, is to transfer the usual perception of an object into the sphere of a new perception – that is, to make a unique semantic modification.”

■ Victor Shklovsky

■ “Art as Technique,” The Art of Biblical Poetry