

PRACTICE TEXT — SHORT STORY EXTRACT

Read the practice text, then choose one question

Over the Fence

An original text written for this practice paper.

Tama had been told, many times, to stay away from Mrs Kerr's section. It sat at the end of Rata Street like a closed mouth, its hedge clipped square, its curtains drawn, its letterbox rusted shut. The kids said she kept a lamp lit all night to watch for trespassers. Tama did not believe it, but he walked the long way round all the same.

On the Saturday of the school holidays, the wind took his kite. It sailed over the hedge in a slow, bright arc, red against the grey, and dropped out of sight. Tama stood at the gate with his stomach clenching. The kite was the last thing his dad had made before he moved to Australia, and the string trailed from his fist like a cut nerve.

He pushed the gate. It groaned, and the sound seemed to travel the whole length of the street. The lawn was brown and brittle, the windows blank. Halfway across, a voice said, "You will want to watch the roses." Mrs Kerr was kneeling in the flowerbed, a small, hard woman in a man's coat, with a trowel in her hand and soil to the elbows.

"I am sorry," Tama said. "My kite." He pointed at the pear tree. The kite hung there, its tail shivering, its paper ribs torn. Mrs Kerr stared at it for a long moment. Then she stood, her knees cracking like twigs, and went to the shed. She came back with a ladder older than Tama's dad.

"Hold it," she said. He held it. She climbed with great care, one slow rung at a time, and Tama saw that her hands, when she reached for the kite, were shaking. She unhooked it with a gentleness that surprised him, and handed it down as if it were a bird.

"It is torn," she said. "I have glue, and paper. My husband used to make kites." She looked at the empty sky above the hedge. "He would have liked the red." Then she turned, and her coat swung, and for the first time, Tama noticed that the lamp in the window was not a trap at all. It was only a lamp, left on for someone who was not coming home.

CHOOSE ONE QUESTION

About 600 to 750 words

QUESTION ONE

Explain how the writer develops the character of Mrs Kerr and the idea of loneliness in 'Over the Fence'. Support your answer with evidence from the text.

QUESTION TWO

Analyse how the writer uses setting and symbols to create mood in 'Over the Fence'. Support your answer with evidence from the text.

QUESTION THREE

Analyse how the writer shows the relationship between Tama and Mrs Kerr, and how it changes. Support your answer with evidence from the text.

Write an essay of about 600 to 750 words. Use short quotations from the text as evidence.

Planning space (not marked)

*Aspect 1: how Mrs Kerr is first presented (the rumours, the house).
Aspect 2: how loneliness is shown (the lamp, the husband).
Choose two or three language features and one quotation for each.
Say how our view of Mrs Kerr changes.*

A MODEL RESPONSE AND GUIDANCE FOR THAT TASK

QUESTION ONE — GUIDE AND MODEL ANSWER

Worked solution

What the question asks

You must write about two specific aspects, the character of Mrs Kerr and the idea of loneliness, explain how the writer's language features develop each, and support your points with quotations.

What each grade looks like for this question

Grade	What the response shows
Achieved	Describes Mrs Kerr and the idea of loneliness, identifies some language features and gives relevant quotations.
Merit	Explains how the writer develops Mrs Kerr from a frightening figure to a lonely one, linking language features and evidence to both aspects.
Excellence	Analyses perceptively how the writer controls the reader's view, using description, contrast and symbol to move from fear to sympathy, with a clear argument and precise evidence.

Evidence you could use

- "like a closed mouth": simile for the house and its owner
- "a small, hard woman in a man's coat": description that is both tough and sad
- "her hands, when she reached for the kite, were shaking": detail that shows she is fragile
- "left on for someone who was not coming home": the lamp becomes a symbol of loneliness

Model response (about 630 words, aiming at Excellence)

In 'Over the Fence', the writer develops the character of Mrs Kerr by changing the way the reader sees her. She is first presented as a frightening figure, but she becomes a lonely woman who is still grieving. The idea of loneliness is shown through description, details of her actions and the symbol of the lamp.

At the start, Mrs Kerr is described through the rumours of others and through her house. The house "sat at the end of Rata Street like a closed mouth". This simile suggests silence and refusal to speak, so the reader imagines a cold and unfriendly person. The hedge is "clipped square" and the curtains are "drawn", which also suggests that she has shut the world out. The children believe that "she kept a lamp lit all night to watch for trespassers", so the writer creates fear before we meet her.

When Mrs Kerr appears, the description shows both toughness and sadness. She is "a small, hard woman in a man's coat". The adjective "hard" suggests she seems stern, while "small" makes her seem vulnerable. The detail of the "man's coat" is important, because it hints that she wears her dead husband's clothing, which is a first sign of her loneliness. The writer also gives her a gruff manner ("You will want to watch the roses") that is unfriendly on the surface but practical and caring underneath.

The turning point comes when she rescues the kite. She climbs the ladder "with great care, one slow rung at a time", and her hands are "shaking". These details show that she is old and frail, and that helping a stranger costs her effort. When she takes the kite down "as if it were a bird", the simile shows tenderness. The reader's fear changes to sympathy.

The writer also uses the kite as a symbol that links the two characters. For Tama, the kite is "the last thing his dad had made before he moved to Australia", so it stands for a lost parent and a loneliness of his own. The string that "trailed from his fist like a cut nerve" is a vivid simile that suggests pain

and the sharpness of his loss. When Mrs Kerr repairs the kite, she is not only mending paper but also offering the boy the care that he has missed. This shared loss is what allows the two to understand one another, and it deepens the theme of loneliness by showing that it affects both young and old.

The writer's control of sentence length and word choice supports these ideas. The sentences describing the house are long and cold, listing details such as the hedge, the curtains and the letterbox, so that the reader feels the closed-off quality of her life. In contrast, the simple sentences "He held it. She climbed" are short and direct, which makes the moment of cooperation seem quiet and important. The verb "cracking" in "her knees cracking like twigs" gives Mrs Kerr a fragile, natural quality that is far from the threatening figure the children imagine.

The final paragraph makes the loneliness clear. Mrs Kerr says that her "husband used to make kites" and that "He would have liked the red." She looks at "the empty sky", and the word "empty" reflects her own emptiness. The lamp, which seemed to be a trap, is revealed as "left on for someone who was not coming home". This symbol changes the meaning of the first paragraph: the light is not for watching trespassers, but for waiting.

Through the contrast between the rumours and the real woman, the writer shows that loneliness can look like unfriendliness. By the end, Mrs Kerr is no longer a frightening neighbour but a grieving woman, and the reader understands her quietly.

Why this response earns Excellence

- It writes about both aspects (character and loneliness) and links them.
- Each quotation is explained, and the effect on the reader is named.
- It shows how the lamp changes meaning, which is a perceptive point about the whole text.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Cover both aspects named in the question, and for each point give a quotation and explain what it shows.

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