

“Flower Power”

Reading Comprehension – Short Stories

Directions: Read the story. Then answer the questions below.



When her grandmother’s health began to **deteriorate** in the fall of 1994, Mary would make the drive from Washington, DC to Winchester, VA every few days.

She hated highway driving, finding it ugly and **monotonous**. She preferred to take meandering back roads to her grandmother’s hospital. When she drove through the rocky town of Harpers Ferry, the beauty of the rough waters churning at the intersection of the Shenandoah and Potomac rivers always **captivated** her.

Toward the end of her journey, Mary had to get on highway 81. It was here that she discovered a surprising bit of beauty during one of her trips. Along the median of the highway, there was a long stretch of wildflowers. *They were thin and delicate and purple, and swayed in the wind as if whispering poems to each other.*

The first time she saw the flowers, Mary was seized by an uncontrollable urge to pull over on the highway and yank a bunch from the soil. She carried them into her grandmother’s room when she arrived at the hospital and placed them in a water pitcher by her bed.

For a moment her grandmother seemed more **lucid** than usual. She thanked Mary for the flowers, commented on their beauty and asked where she had gotten them. Mary was overjoyed by the ability of the flowers to wake something up inside her ailing grandmother.

Afterwards, Mary began carrying scissors in the car during her trips to visit her grandmother. She would quickly glide onto the shoulder, jump out of the car, and clip a bunch of flowers. Each time Mary placed the flowers in the pitcher, her grandmother’s eyes would light up and they would have a splendid conversation.

One morning in late October, Mary got a call that her grandmother had taken a turn for the worse. Mary was in such a hurry to get to her grandmother that she sped past her flower spot. She decided to turn around, head several miles back, and cut a bunch.

Mary arrived at the hospital to find her grandmother very weak and unresponsive. She placed the flowers in the pitcher and sat down to hold her grandmother’s hand. She felt a squeeze on her fingers. It was the last conversation they had.

Questions:

1) As used at the beginning of the story, which is the best antonym for **deteriorate**?

- A. improve
- B. increase
- C. adjust
- D. accumulate

2) As used in the beginning of the story, which is the best definition for **captivated**?

- A. energized
- B. fascinated
- C. humbled
- D. relaxed

3) *"She hated highway driving, finding it ugly and **monotonous**."*

Which of the following is the best way to rewrite the above sentence, while keeping its original meaning?

- A. She hated highway driving, finding it ugly and tedious.
- B. She hated highway driving, finding it ugly and confusing.
- C. She hated highway driving, finding it ugly and nerve-racking.
- D. She hated highway driving, finding it ugly and time-consuming.

4) *"They were thin and delicate and purple, and swayed in the wind as if whispering poems to each other."*

Which of the following literary techniques is used in the above sentence?

- A. vernacular, suggesting the dialect of a particular geographical area
- B. assonance, characterized by the repetition of identical or similar vowel sounds in successive words
- C. foreshadowing, characterized by the use of hints to suggest what is to come
- D. personification, characterized by a thing or object being endowed with human qualities

5) Which best describes what the act of stopping for flowers on the side of the highway became for Mary?

- A. monotonous
- B. a ritual
- C. a regret
- D. torturous

6) What other title would best fit this passage?

- A. "The Fall"
 - B. "On the Road"
 - C. "Wildflower Poetry"
 - D. "Living for Tomorrow"
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Questions (continued):

7) In the final paragraph, the author writes, "She felt a squeeze on her fingers. It was the last conversation they had." Which of the following best describes what the author is trying to communicate in these sentences?

- A. Mary and her grandmother held hands and had a splendid conversation
- B. Mary's grandmother was too weak to communicate with Mary
- C. Mary and her grandmother communicated through touch
- D. Mary's grandmother liked the flowers that Mary brought

8) Which of the following accurately describe Mary's personality?

- I. impatient
 - II. drawn towards beauty
 - III. loving
- A. I only
 - B. I and II
 - C. II and III
 - D. I, II, and III

9) As used in the middle of the story, which is the best antonym for **lucid**?

- A. false
- B. realistic
- C. muddled
- D. determined

10) What do the flowers come to signify most for Mary?

- A. the natural beauty of U.S. highways
- B. an opportunity to compose herself before visiting her grandmother
- C. a final chance to connect with her grandmother
- D. a way to make the hospital room more pleasant

Do you have many routines? Do you like routines? Explain.

Answers and Explanations

1) **A**

deteriorate (*verb*): to make or become worse or inferior in character, quality, value, etc.

In the first paragraph, we learn that Mary's grandmother's health "began to deteriorate," and that Mary drove a great distance to visit her grandmother every few days. In paragraph 2, we learn that Mary's grandmother was in the hospital. We can infer from these statements that the word deteriorate expresses a decline or worsening of Mary's grandmother's health. The opposite of that would be if Mary's grandmother's health improved. Therefore **(A)** is correct.

To *increase* means to become greater or larger. Health cannot become greater or larger. Therefore **(B)** is incorrect. To *adjust* means to conform or adapt. Adapting is not the opposite of getting worse. Therefore **(C)** is incorrect. To *accumulate* means to collect or gather. Collecting is not the opposite of getting worse. Therefore **(D)** is incorrect.

2) **B**

captivate (*adjective*): strongly attracted; filled with wonder and delight.

In the second paragraph, the story says that Mary was "always captivated" by "the rough waters churning at the intersection of the Shenandoah and Potomac rivers." In addition, the story says that Mary "preferred to take meandering back roads to her grandmother's hospital" because she wanted to see the rivers. We can infer from this that Mary was willing to take longer to get to her destination because she thought that the rivers were beautiful, and that Mary was attracted to the sight of the waters. The word fascinated means to be intensely attracted or having your attention fixated. Therefore **(B)** is correct.

Energize means to invigorate or activate, not to attract or delight. While Mary may have been energized by beauty, the story does not offer any information to prove this was true. Therefore **(A)** is incorrect. *Humbled* means made to feel modest or insignificant. Feeling insignificant is not the same as feeling strongly attracted. Therefore **(C)** is incorrect. When someone is *relaxed*, he or she is freed from strain or tension. This is different from being attracted to or delighted by something. Therefore **(D)** is incorrect.

3) **A**

monotonous (*adjective*): lacking in variety; tediously unvarying.

In the beginning of the story, the author writes that Mary "hated highway driving, finding it ugly and monotonous. She preferred to take meandering back roads to her grandmother's hospital." We can infer from this that Mary found the monotonous road ugly, and preferred the meandering (winding and indirect) route more enjoyable. Since something monotonous is different from

winding and indirect, it can be inferred that monotonous means straightforward, plain, or unvarying. Tedious means boring or tiresome by dullness. This is very similar to lacking in variety. Therefore **(A)** is correct.

Confusing means puzzling or difficult to follow. A straight highway would be less confusing than meandering roads. Therefore **(B)** is incorrect. *Nerve-wracking* means intensely distressing to the nerves. While some people may find highway driving distressing, there is no information in the story that tells us Mary does. Therefore **(C)** is incorrect. *Time-consuming* means taking lots of time. A direct highway route would take less time than meandering back roads. Therefore **(D)** is incorrect.

4) **D**

The flowers “swayed in the wind as if they were whispering poems to each other.” This line describes the flowers by using words that would normally describe human actions. Only people can whisper poems to each other, so this activity is uniquely human. Therefore **(D)** is correct.

Vernacular means the dialect of a particular geographical area. This line is not written in dialect, but in standard English. Therefore **(A)** is incorrect. *Assonance* indicates the repetition of identical or similar vowel sounds. This kind of repetition is not present in this line. Therefore **(B)** is incorrect. *Foreshadowing* means the use of hints to indicate what is to come. The flowers swaying in the wind do not contain hints about what is to come in the story. Therefore **(C)** is incorrect.

5) **B**

A ritual is an established habit or routine. In paragraph 6, we learn that “Mary began carrying scissors in the car during her trips to visit her grandmother. She would quickly glide onto the shoulder, jump out of the car, and clip a bunch of flowers.” Since she did this each time she visited her grandmother, these actions can be described as a habit or routine. Therefore **(B)** is correct.

Monotonous means lacking in variety to the point of boredom. While Mary’s stops to cut flowers to her grandmother were repetitive, there is nothing in the story that indicates that Mary found these stops boring. Therefore **(A)** is incorrect. *Regret* is a sense of disappointment or loss over something that could have gone differently. Mary does not regret stopping for flowers; indeed, she looks forward to it. Therefore **(C)** is incorrect. *Torturous* means painful or causing suffering. There is no information in the story that stopping for flowers causes Mary pain or suffering. Therefore **(D)** is incorrect.

6) **C**

In the third paragraph, the story says that the wildflowers “swayed in the wind as if they were whispering poems to each other.” The story is about how picking wildflowers on the way to visit her grandmother became a meaningful part of the last days Mary and her grandmother spent together. Poetry is also a meaningful way of communicating for many people. Therefore **(C)** is correct.

The story takes place in the fall, but the setting is not a significant part of the story. Therefore **(A)** is incorrect. While the story does describe Mary's time on the road, that is only part of the story. It is where part of the story took place, but it does not capture the full meaning of the impact of the flowers on Mary's grandmother. Therefore **(B)** is incorrect. None of the actions in the story relate to a future purpose or have to do with living for tomorrow. Therefore **(D)** is incorrect.

7) **C**

In the last paragraph, Mary arrives at the hospital to find her grandmother "weak and unresponsive." However, when Mary held her grandmother's hand, "she felt a squeeze on her fingers." Since Mary's grandmother squeezed Mary's hand, we can infer that Mary's grandmother knew that Mary was with her, and wanted to communicate that. Since this is the last communication that Mary and her grandmother have, it is their last "conversation," even though no words are spoken. Therefore **(C)** is correct.

Mary's grandmother was too weak to have a splendid conversation with her. She is too weak to do anything but squeeze her hand. Therefore **(A)** is incorrect. Although Mary's grandmother was "very weak and unresponsive," she was able to communicate with Mary by squeezing her hand. Therefore, **(B)** is incorrect. While Mary's grandmother probably would have liked the flowers Mary brought, it is unclear from the story whether her grandmother was even aware the flowers were there. However, she is aware of Mary's presence, and made happy by it, as we know because she squeezes Mary's hand. Therefore **(D)** is incorrect.

8) **C**

The passage tells us that Mary hated driving on the highway because it was "ugly and monotonous," and that Mary "preferred to take meandering back roads" because she was captivated by "the beauty of the rough waters" that she was able to see on that drive. This tells us that Mary would rather take longer to get where she is going in order to enjoy beautiful scenery. Therefore, we can infer that Mary is not impatient because she is willing to take a longer route. This eliminates **option (I)**. This information also allows the reader to infer that Mary is drawn towards beauty, because she deliberately alters her course to one that is more beautiful. This supports **option (II)**. In paragraph five, we learn that "Mary was overjoyed by the ability of the flowers to wake something up inside her ailing grandmother." After that, Mary brings flowers to her grandmother each time she visits. These actions show that Mary loves her grandmother. This supports **option (III)**. Therefore, **(C)** is correct.

9) **C**

lucid (*adjective*): mentally sound; sane or rational; intelligible; clear; easily understood.

Paragraph 5 says Mary's grandmother "seemed more lucid than usual. She thanked Mary for the flowers, commented on their beauty and asked where she had gotten them. Mary was overjoyed by the ability of the flowers to wake something up inside her grandmother." We can infer from these statements that when Mary's grandmother was more lucid, she was awake, able to see what was around her and able to speak with Mary about it. *Muddled* can mean confused or not clear-thinking. Not clear-thinking is the opposite of clear. Therefore **(C)** is correct.

False means untrue. Untrue is not the opposite of clear. Therefore **(A)** is incorrect. *Realistic* means showing an awareness and acceptance of reality. Accepting reality is related to being mentally sound. It is not the opposite of clear or mentally sound. Therefore **(B)** is incorrect. *Determined* means decided or resolved. Resolved is not the opposite of clear or mentally sound. Therefore **(D)** is incorrect.

10) **C**

In paragraph 5, we learn that "Mary was overjoyed by the ability of the flowers to wake up something inside her ailing grandmother." In the next paragraph it says, "Each time Mary placed the flowers in the pitcher, her grandmother's eyes would light up and they would have a splendid conversation." We can infer from these statements that the flowers in some way helped Mary's grandmother communicate with Mary. Therefore **(C)** is correct.

Although Mary does find natural beauty in the flowers by the roadside, her opinion is that beauty is the exception, not the rule, on the highway. Therefore **(A)** is incorrect. While taking the time to stop and collect the flowers might give Mary time to compose herself before visiting her grandmother, there is nothing in the story that suggests that the flowers serve that purpose. Therefore **(B)** is incorrect. Though the flowers may make the hospital room more pleasant, that is not what they signify most to Mary. The connection and communication with her grandmother through the flowers are much more important to her. Therefore **(D)** is incorrect.