GRADE 11

SBA REVIEW

LETTER THAT CHANGED MY LIFE

ANALYZE CONTEXT CLUES*
SUMMARIZING
CHARACTERIZATION
LITERARY ELEMENTS*
I was not yet 30 years old and was working as a firefighter in the South Bronx’s Engine Co. 82, probably the world’s most active firehouse at the time. It was warm and sunny, the kind of leisurely Sunday that brought extra activity to the neighborhood and to its firefighters. We must have had 15 or 20 calls that day, the worst being a garbage fire in the rear of an abandoned building, which required a hard pull of 600 feet of cotton-jacketed hose.

Between alarms I would rush to the company office to read Captain Gray’s copy of the Sunday *New York Times*. It was late in the afternoon when I finally got to the *Book Review* section. As I read it, my blood began to boil. An article blatantly stated what I took to be a calumny—that William Butler Yeats, the Nobel Prize-winning light of the Irish Literary Renaissance, had transcended his Irishness and was forever to be known as a universal poet.

There were few things I was more proud of than my Irish heritage, and ever since I first picked up a book of his poems from a barracks shelf when I was in the military, Yeats had been my favorite Irish writer, followed by Sean O’Casey and James Joyce.

My ancestors were Irish farmers, fishermen and blue-collar workers, but as far as I can tell, they all had a feeling for literature. It was passed on to my own mother, a telephone operator, who hardly ever sat down without a book in her hands. And at that moment my own fingernails might have been soiled with the soot of the day’s fires, but I felt as prepared as any Trinity don to stand up in the court of public opinion and protest. Not only that Yeats had lived his life and written his poetry through the very essence of his Irish sensibility, but that it was offensive to think Irishness—no matter if it was psychological, social or literary—was something to be transcended.
5 My stomach was churning, and I determined not to let an idle minute pass. “Hey, Captain Gray. Could I use your typewriter?” I asked.

6 The typewriter was so old that I had to use just one finger to type, my strongest one, even though I could type with all ten. I grabbed the first piece of clean paper I could find—one that had the logo of the Fire Department of the City of New York across the top—and, hoping there would be a break in the alarms for 20 minutes or so, wrote out a four-paragraph letter of indignation to the editor of the Sunday Book Review.

7 Throughout his poetry, I postulated, Yeats yearned for a messiah to lead Ireland out from under the bondage of English rule, and his view of the world and the people in it was fundamentally Irish.

8 Just as I addressed the envelope, the final alarm of my tour came in, and as I slid down the long brass pole, I felt unexpectedly calm, as if a great rock had been purged from the bottom of my stomach.

9 I don’t know why I felt it my obligation to safeguard the reputation of the world’s greatest poet, at least next to Homer and Shakespeare, or to inscribe an apologia for Irish writing. I just knew that I had to write that letter, in the same way a priest has to pray, or a musician has to play an instrument.

10 Until that point in my life I had not written much of value—a few poems and short stories, the beginning of a coming-of-age novel. I knew that my writing was anything but refined. Like a beginning artist who loves to draw, I understood that the more one draws, or writes, or does anything, the better the end result will be, and so I wrote often to better control my writing skills, to master them. I sent some material to various magazines and reviews but found no one willing to publish me.

11 It was a special and unexpected delight, then, when I learned something I’d written would finally see print. Ironically it wasn’t one of my poems or short stories—it was my letter to the Times. I suppose the editor decided to publish it because he was first attracted by the official nature of my stationery (was his staff taking smoke breaks out on the fire escape?), and then by the incongruity of a ghetto firefighter’s using words like messianism, for in the lines below my letter it was announced that I was a New York City firefighter. I’d like to think, though, that the editor silently agreed with my thesis.

12 I remember receiving through the fire department’s address about 20 sympathetic and congratulatory letters from professors around the country. These letters made me feel like I was not only a published writer but an opinion maker. It was as if I was suddenly thrust into being someone whose views mattered.

13 I also received a letter from True magazine and one from The New Yorker, asking for an interview. It was the latter that proved momentous, for when an article titled “Fireman Smith” appeared in that magazine, I received a telephone call from the editor of a large publishing firm who asked if I might be interested in writing a book about my life.

14 I had little confidence in my ability to write a whole book, though I did intuit that my work as a firefighter was a worthy subject. And so I wrote Report from Engine Co. 82 in six
months, and it went on to sell two million copies and to be translated into 12 languages. In the years that followed, I wrote three more best-sellers, and last year published a memoir, *A Song for Mary: An Irish-American Memory*.

15 Being a writer had been far from my expectations; being a best-selling author was almost unfathomable. How had it happened? I often found myself thinking about it, marveling at it, and my thoughts always came back to that letter to the *New York Times*.

16 For me, the clearest explanation is that I had found the subject I was searching for, one I felt so strongly about that the writing was a natural consequence of the passion I felt. I was to feel this same kind of passion when I began writing about firefighters and, later, when writing about my mother. These are subjects that, to me, represent the great values of human life—decency, honesty and fairness—subjects that burn within me as I write.

17 Over the years, all five of my children have come to me periodically with one dilemma or another. Should I study English or art? Should I go out for soccer or basketball? Should I take a job with this company or that one?

18 My answer is always the same, yet they still ask, for reassurance is a good and helpful thing. Think about what you’re feeling deep down in the pit of your stomach, I tell them, and measure the heat of the fire there, for that is the passion that will flow through your heart. Your education and your experience will guide you toward making a right decision, but your passion will enable you to make a difference in whatever you do.

19 That’s what I learned the day I stood up for Ireland’s greatest poet.

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QUESTIONS

1. In paragraph 2, the word calumny means —
   
   A disappointment  
   B anecdote  
   C slander  
   D compliment

2. Before the publication of his letter, what had Smith written?
   
   F A biographical essay on Yeats  
   G Poems, short stories, and part of a novel  
   H Reviews for the New York Times Book Review  
   J Report from Engine Co. 82

3. Which of these is the best summary of the article?
   
   A A firefighter working at the South Bronx’s Engine Co. 82 is distracted by the amount of fires in his neighborhood. He attempts to read the newspaper and write letters, but the constant alarms make concentration impossible. He is finally able to find time to write and becomes a best-selling author.  
   B A writer of Irish ancestry believes that William Butler Yeats is one of the finest poets who has ever lived. He is convinced that the Irish poet’s reputation should be defended, so he writes a letter to the New York Times stating his position. The writer is excited when his letter is eventually published in the newspaper.  
   C A firefighter disagrees with an article he reads about his favorite Irish writer. His strong feelings prompt him to write a response that captures the attention of the publishing industry. He credits his eventual success as a writer to the force of emotion that drove him to write the letter.  
   D A best-selling author is interested in the poetry of William Butler Yeats. Although this author has little confidence in his own ability, he writes a book titled Report from Engine Co. 82 and a memoir called A Song for Mary: An Irish-American Memory. He is surprised by his own success.

4. What angers Smith when he reads the article about Yeats?
   
   F The idea that Yeats is no longer considered primarily an Irish poet  
   G The presumption that firefighters cannot appreciate the poetry of Yeats  
   H The notion that Yeats did not deserve the Nobel Prize  
   J The belief that James Joyce was a better writer than Yeats
5. In paragraph 8, the author uses a simile to describe —
   A the sickness he feels upon hearing the alarm
   B the excitement he feels when he addresses his letter
   C the fear he feels when sliding down the brass pole
   D the relief he feels after writing the letter

6. It is clear from paragraphs 5 and 6 that Smith wrote his letter —
   F impulsively
   G cautiously
   H thoughtlessly
   J effortlessly

7. In what way is this selection ironic?
   A Smith shares the same Irish heritage as William Butler Yeats.
   B Smith’s letter defending another writer is the start of his own writing career.
   C Firefighters now have a literary figure they can admire.
   D The editor publishes Smith’s letter only because it is on official stationery.

8. Smith believes that his philosophy about writing —
   F can be applied to any pursuit
   G comes from his Irish background
   H can be replaced by education
   J helps others appreciate poetry

9. In paragraph 18, what does Smith mean when he advises his children to “measure the heat of the fire there”?
   A They should compare their own goals to those of their father.
   B They should pay attention to the intensity of their feelings.
   C They should use writing as a tool to change lives.
   D They should be inspired by their father’s love.

10. The reason the author alludes to the greatness of Homer and Shakespeare in paragraph 9 is to —
    F boast about his knowledge of poetry
    G apologize for Irish writing
    H protect Yeats’s reputation
    J link Yeats to other famous writers

11. Which line from the selection best explains the effect that the four-paragraph letter had on Smith’s life?
    A I wrote often to better control my writing skills, to master them.
    B I’d like to think, though, that the editor silently agreed with my thesis.
    C It was as if I was suddenly thrust into being someone whose views mattered.
    D That’s what I learned the day I stood up for Ireland’s greatest poet.
12. Why is “Letter That Changed My Life” a good title for this selection? Explain your answer and support it with evidence from the selection.

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ANSWERS

1. C
2. G
3. C
4. F
5. D
6. F
7. B
8. F
9. B
10. J
11. C
12. SA