Assignment

DIRECTIONS: Read Ben Okri's "A Prayer from the Living" and answer the questions that follow.

1. On page two, the narrator says, "In the town everyone had died," however, he can't mean this literally as a few lines down he writes, "The only people who weren't dead were the dead." This would seem to contradict the idea that all were *literally* dead as well as suggest there are two sorts of "dead" people. Keeping this in mind, explain what Okri intends by describing the town as populated by the dead.

2. The way that Okri describes the town and people who inhabit it help establish the point of view of the dead. Choose one such description of either the way something looks, sounds, feels, tastes, or smells and explain how it helps to create this point of view. You should use evidence from the text (quotation) in support of your answer.

3. In the final page, the Western photographer films the schoolroom. He is described by Okri as "good-hearted" and "weeping" amid the dead and the dying. However, the singing and demeanor of the "dead" are described as "intensely joyful." What explains this difference in point of view between the "white man" and the starving Africans? Explain using evidence from the text (quotation).

Model for Question Number Two

Question:

How does the way the author describes something reveal a point of view?

Sample Answer Template:

By describing _____ in a _____ manner, the author reveals how [somebody feels a certain way about something]. For example, when the author pictures _____ as _____, it suggests _____. This helps the reader to understand _____ because _____. In other words, _____.

Descriptive Passage from Okey Ndibe's "My Biafran Eyes":

Air raids became a terrifying staple of our lives. Nigerian military jets stole into our air space, then strafed with abandon. They flew low and at a furious speed. The ramp of their engines shook buildings and made the very earth quake (3).

Example Paragraph:

> In describing the Nigerian bombing raids that disrupted his life, the young Okeu Ndibe reveals how helpless he feels in the face of war. For example, the air raids are described as a "staple of our lives." To be "a staple" means that it forms an important part of something, and here it suggests just how large the idea of a bombing looms in the author's mind. Whether or not the bombs that "shook buildings and made the very earth quake" occur often, they seem like they do to the young Ndibe, and the fact that he sees the bombs in terms of their destructive potential suggests his fear. In context of the description, then, the bombs are frightening because there is no defense against them. They come at any time, and they can wipe out Ndibe at any time.

This evidence is a description, and the explanation is how what *the way* the thing describes shows the way that he feels. If you're explaining an inference, you're doing it right. If you're just summarizing the evidence or repeating it, you're doing it wrong (see below).

Bad Example:

> In describing the Nigerian bombing raids that disrupted his life, the young Okeu Ndibe reveals how terrified he is in the face of war. For example, he describes the air raids as a "terrifying staple of our lives." This shows that he was scared. In other words, he worries that might be a victim of the bombs, and as a result, is frightened.

This evidence is literally labelling the point of view. As a result, there's nothing left to say after the evidence other than repeat the same idea again and again (terrifying → scared → frightened). When you go to find your evidence, what you're looking for is *the way* that the author describes something-- not a literal answer to the question *How does the author feel?* Look for descriptions, not passages or words that answer the question literally.