

DIRECTIONS: Choose either “Priority” by Lydia Davis or “Sticks” by George Saunders and write at least a couple of paragraphs analyzing one of the two stories in terms of either paradox, situational irony, or tonal irony. Use these means of analysis to explain what the story is really about (a theme) in the conclusion.

The more interesting, clever, and accurate your argument, the better your grade will be.

Due date:

This assignment is due any time before May 7. The due date is a ways away to give you maximum flexibility to complete it and prepare for AP exams. If you give the assignment to me early enough, I will mark it up with comments and corrections as if it were a timed writing. If you turn in the finished assignment early, there will be a small grade incentive (+3 points). If you miss the midnight deadline but turn in the assignment before eight hours have elapsed, there will be a small point deduction (-3 points). If you turn in the assignment between eight and twenty-four hours late there will be a larger point deduction (-10 points). If you turn in the assignment at any point after that, there will be a substantial point deduction (-20 points). If you turn in the assignment late, but do not want points deducted, you may earn back credit by doing the assignment again for both stories.

Sample Text:

A Little Fable
By Franz Kafka

“Alas,” said the mouse, “the whole world is growing smaller every day. At first it was so big that I was afraid, I kept running and running, and I was glad when at last I saw walls far away to the right and left, but these long walls have narrowed so quickly that I am in the last chamber already, and there in the corner stands the trap that I must run into.”

“You only need to change your direction,” said the cat, and ate it up.

Sample Answer:

Kafka’s “A Little Fable” develops the idea of alienated individuals living in an absurd universe. People live their lives by rote, only occasionally pausing to ask themselves “Why?” in response to these learned habits of living. To question this purpose, though, is to undermine these patterns, seeing, like Kafka’s mouse, both the narrowing of one’s choices and the terminus of all pursuits (and all lives): death and oblivion (Kafka’s metaphorical “[mouse]trap” into which the mouse “must run”).

That the mouse has gained this insight is evident in the description of its world. From the mouse’s point of view, the maze is initially incomprehensible and difficult to navigate. Rather than seize his existential freedom to act in the world, to find his own path, the mouse keeps “running and running,” looking for “walls” to limit his choices to a predetermined course-- actively seeking the mechanical life to which he has become accustomed. Inevitably, though, the mouse reaches “the last chamber” and even sees its end, though the resignation in tone (“Alas,” the mouse sighs) signals more despair than revolt against the absurdity of his world, having run the maze only to find that there had never been anything worth seeking in the first place.

Ironically, seizing control of one’s fate is exactly what the cat counsels, representing a revolt against both death and the purely reactive mode of living adopted by the mouse to that point. The irony,

of course, lies in the cat's subsequent actions, eating the mouse up, for while the cat suggests asserting one's freedom, it simultaneously precludes the possibility of taking advantage of that advice. The expectation of hope, in other words, is subsumed by the reality of the very death and oblivion the cat warns against, as the cat "[eats] him up." Apparently one can only choose the means of one's destruction, not whether is to be destroyed.

More than this, though: in a larger sense, even if the mouse were in a position to follow the cat's advice, the only meaning it would give his life could only be personal and transitory, since the fable suggests that no one can ultimately overcome the absurdity of living. At the very least, one is constrained by the ultimate and irreversible absurdity of death, and in this way, whatever one comes to understand of this world is ultimately futile. Presumably if it is not the maze or the cat, it would be something else that leads to the mouse's demise. For Kafka, this seemingly irreconcilable paradox (all meaning is meaningless) describes the human condition; there simply is no escape from the maze in which every individual is trapped.

