

Sample Essay One

In the novel, My Brilliant Friend, Ferrante takes the reader through a series of events while demonstrating all sides of Lila and Elena's friendship. While the young girls face many tough situations individually, their friendship is correspondingly reflecting the difficulties of their lives as well. Ferrante demonstrates Elena discovering her own value through gaining power in her education.

The importance of education develops throughout the novel. For example, Lila and Elena have a slow start to their friendship. Elena clearly attempts to learn from Lila by discovering her motives. She allows Lila to take charge. After Elena is aware of Lila's way of being, she begins to break away from the norm they developed for each other. To do this, Elena begins school. Although Lila does too, she soon quits for personal reasons. This became hard for Elena, since she so strongly relied on Lila, but she continued to do her best. Elena was not fully aware, but she was steadily gaining power in her relationship with Lila. It is not so much that Elena sought to find power over Lila, but that she wanted to be more like her. By trying to be closer and similar to Lila, Elena unconsciously surpassed her in many ways, thus discovering her capability.

In addition, by Elena continuing with school and gaining education, she matured as an individual. It soon becomes clear that she no longer felt the need to depend on Lila. This may seem unimportant, but it is in fact crucial to Ferrante's goal of the novel because Elena gained much more than an education. Through her development in school without Lila, she began to notice the depth of situations, such as her own relationship with Lila. As the girls would constantly encounter each other, Elena would take a mental check of all that was happening. She would realize the depth of Lila as a person started to fade. By having education as an outlet to the reality of life, Elena was able to expose the truth of her power. Not having Lila to guide her anymore, Elena also felt empowered to accomplish more on her own. More specifically, Lila needed her brother to help her plan for a new shoe for their father's shop. While, in contrast, Elena would more likely do it herself, as she did with her continuation to higher level schooling. In short, Elena became more aware of her self-worth through her educational route.

The novel clearly provides multiple situations in which cause not only Lila and Elena, but everyone, to struggle for control. As Elena struggled with the lack of companionship with Lila, she still found a way to overcome her insecurity. Overall, Elena indirectly developed a large form of power over Elena by surpassing her independence and motives as an individual through her development in education.

Sample Essay Two

Throughout the entirety of My Brilliant Friend, Elena attempts to free herself from the power and influence of Lila Cerullo. This is shown through Elena throwing Lila's doll into the sewers and by Elena's vacation to Ischia.

An example of Elena's struggle to free herself would be when she throws Lila doll into the sewers. Just before this, Lila had thrown Elena's doll down into the sewer. Elena is upset by this and wishes to inflict the same pain to Lila, as well as enact revenge for her doll. This is an early example of Elena's lashing out against Lila. What this shows is that Elena fully realized

that she did not have to subject herself to Lila's borderline abusive behavior. Furthermore, this also highlights the fact that Elena realized that she could cause pain to Lila, which represented some semblance of her having power over Lila and beginning to free herself from Lila's influence over her.

A second example of Elena's struggle with Lila's power would be her vacation. Fully knowing the fact that she would have limited contact with Lila, Elena took a vacation to the island of Ischia to stay with Maestra Oliviero's cousin Nella Incardo. The vacation itself was somewhat of a subconscious attempt to escape Lila's grasp. However, the much more powerful attempt at this would be in the letters Elena sent to Lila in her time on Ischia. Letter after letter, Elena patiently awaited Lila's reply, seemingly embracing the power Lila held over her. However, Elena received no reply. Elena wrote one final letter, telling Lila that it would be her last, signifying that Elena had finally gained some amount of self-control. But much of that was shattered when she finally received a response from Lila. So quickly had Elena gone from the brink of freedom right back to helplessly stuck under the influence of Lila. This turn of events demonstrated just how much of an influence Lila truly held over Elena. Simply by writing a letter back to Elena, not only did Lila grab ahold of her once more, but she tightened her grip further, crippling further attempts at escaping from the influence she held over Elena.

Throughout the entirety of the novel, Lila has a hold on Elena, even when they drift apart. Elena felt pushed to do well in school because that is what Lila had done. When Lila stopped going to school, Elena brought her textbooks to Lila to allow her to continue to study, pushing Elena to continue doing well in school. But when Lila stopped caring about learning so much, so did Elena. Similarly with her boyfriend, Lila had quite an influence there too. Elena would often engage in sexual activities with her boyfriend. Upon learning that Lila didn't take part in that even with the man she was to be wed to, Elena slowly became more like Lila in that respect, waning back what ever it was she was doing with her boyfriend to a halt. Lila's influence over Elena was powerful, even when they weren't close friends. She basically had a say in every part of Elena's life, whether Elena allowed it or not. Nearly every attempt Elena made at escaping Lila's grasp not only failed, but ultimately tightened the grip Lila held on her.

Sample Essay Three

The drive and desire for power is an intrinsic value of all human beings, but the ability to overcome obstacles to achieve success is a test of true power. In Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend*, the power struggle between the two main characters, Elena and Lila, highlights Ferrante's message, how gender roles, specifically in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities, are limiting and destructive. Through their competitive nature in school and infatuation with relationships, Ferrante analyzes roles in little Italy.

Elena and Lila's competitive nature in academics demonstrates the limits of gender roles. In post-WWII Italy, women are reduced to domestic life and are rarely considered educated. However, in Elena's early childhood, she recites a memory of Elena's surprising intelligence in primary school. Coming from a poor, underprivileged family, a competitive drive emerges between the two girls that extends throughout their adolescence. While the struggle to outshine the other and learning Latin, Greek, and formal texts is a personal obstacle., the limits of their socioeconomic status and gender inhibit their ability to further studies. Lila, most

evidently, is limited by her obligations to help her father's financial burdens and thus can only learn in private, while Elena is constantly condemned by her parents for pursuing an education due to the economic strains. Regardless of these limits, the power struggle of the two to dominate over the other or to at least be the less dependent is a trivial matter in respects to their more privileged neighbors that are male and can afford an education easily, such as the Solares or Carruci family. Ferrante is at odds with societal standards for women in education, arguing the limitations of academics for poor girls ultimately lead to internal destruction. Elena and Lila's desires for academics simply do not follow these norms and are challenged.

But perhaps more surprisingly is how their infatuation with relationships criticizes the role of women in impoverished communities. Along with their competition in academics, Elena and Lila constantly battle each other for the affections of young boys in their community. While Lila appears oblivious to them in the unreliable view of Elena's eyes, her wedding at the end of the book highlights the role of men in society. Up until Lila's marriage to Stephano, Elena is completely dominated by Lila's presence-- she is a shadow in the eyes of Enzo, Alfonso, Pasqual, and so forth. Even as Lila becomes engaged to Stephano, Elena still feels an obligation to date a "real man" that is older to keep balance in power with her best friend. However, this power struggle concludes at the wedding when Elena seemingly breaks free from Lila's influence and Lila realizes her newly wed husband had deceived her. The significant freeing of Elena from Lila's power demonstrates two aspects of gender roles in duality. On one hand, Lila, who has conformed herself to expected roles of a young woman, has buried herself in a marriage where her spouse will more than likely dominate her. She will inevitably fall into the pitfalls of domestic life despite being rich and living a more privileged life. On the other hand, Elena will remain in poverty, however has relinquished herself from societal norms and pursues education. The latter is the ideal choice for women, but often, the path of Lila is the one that is taken. This seemingly innocent feud over affections and Elena's desire to break free from power and become independent, shows the cruelty of women's standards in underprivileged communities.

Elena and Lila's drive for power over each other caused a competitive nature to define the limits of their world. Their socioeconomic status, coupled with the boundaries of their gender, was destructive to their character, most evidently in Lila. But while both girls lead seemingly different lives, their drive for power remains the same. Ferrante puts a criticism of societal standards in the scope of a relatable relationship. However, their impoverished lives as two women growing up only bares truth to the patriarchal limitations of opportunity and actions.

Sample Essay Four

In the novel *My Brilliant Friend*, a drive for power is present in Rino Cerullo's character. Rino Cerullo seeks to gain respect in his father's shoemaker business.

Rino struggles to gain respect because his father is so concrete in the way he runs his business. In the novel, Rino tries to offer his idea of making shoes instead of just fixing them to his father by showing him a pair he has made. But the father is so irritated by the idea to the point where he starts beating Rino violently. This event can enhance the meaning of the work by depicting the harsh and distinct relationship between the children and their parents. This proves

to be an obstacle for the children, making accomplishments made later in the story even more meaningful and greater.

Furthermore, Rino struggles to gain power due to where he lives. In the novel, Rino's father tells Rino that making shoes would be a waste of time because they wouldn't be successful due to them working in a small neighborhood. The setting itself proves to be an obstacle for both Rino and the other children because they believed that success would be difficult for them to achieve. The accomplishments they would make later in the story would defy their expectations and therefore make them more meaningful.

In conclusion, the author uses the power struggle in Rino's character to enhance the difficulties the characters had to face to be successful.

Sample Essay Five

The Neapolitan setting of Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend* is defined by several strata of power relationships. On an individual level, the young protagonist Elena is simultaneously attracted to and struggling to free herself from the influence of her best friend, the charismatic and brilliant Lila. Within the family, there is a more strictly defined hierarchy, as children must defer to the authority of their parents and wives to their husbands. This, in turn, is replicated in the way that households interact within the impoverished neighborhood, as necessity forces a submission of poorer families to those with more wealth. In short, it is a picture of a tradition-bound system where everyone knows their place in relation to everyone else-- and efforts to raise one's status can only occur by working within the rules of this schema. Given this, one of the underlying structures that maintain and nurture this web of power relations is the patriarchal assumption that males should wield comparatively more power than females -- an axiomatic belief that results in consequence-free behavior on behalf of the male characters at the expense of female characters. The railway conductor and poet, Donato Sarratore, provides one such instance of this, and Ferrante uses his character to demonstrate the harmful effects that such a system has on women.

Sarratore, while not wealthy like the Solaras or the Don Achille family, is able to provide more easily than most of the families in the neighborhood, and on the surface, he seems the ideal husband and neighbor: unusually helpful around the house, an avid church goer, and stalwart in the community. This conventional image, however, is largely a façade, as he uses it to mask his philandering ways-- targeting the most vulnerable women in the neighborhood. As a male, even one who is mocked for his seemingly un-masculine sensitivity and predilection for the arts, he is not questioned in a way that a woman would be, and by bestowing his advances on those with the least recourse to rebuff him, he maintains an unequal power balance compared to his romantic interests. The widow Melina, for instance, is easily flattered by the poems Sarratore writes to her, as she is already old before her time with a household full of children and no real means of support. Sarratore's charitable impulses effectively groom her for the affair, especially as he convinces Melina that his home life is miserable, with a wife who does not appreciate him. In contrast to the reliable family man Sarratore, Melina is easily dismissed as unstable and crazy by the neighborhood, especially when she starts to act out her frustrations on Sarratore's wife-- beginning a passive aggressive war with her that culminates in an actual physical altercation. Here Sarratore emerges unscathed, and Melina is dismissed as

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insane. Similarly, later in the novel, after Sarratore has moved away from the neighborhood, the protagonist Elena, an adolescent girl on the cusp of womanhood, encounters the Sarratore family again on vacation in Ischia, where she is staying with the cousin of her primary school teacher. At first unable to understand the hatred that Sarratore's son Nino bears toward his father, Elena soon discovers that Sarratore's charms (his impeccable manners, his urbane outlook, and his vivacity at family gatherings) are a way of grooming Elena in the same way that he had done with Melina. When Sarratore approaches her late at night after everyone else is asleep, he kisses the shocked Elena full on the mouth, slips his hand quickly into her underpants, and confesses his love for her. As a teenager, Elena is in no position to challenge Sarratore, and he knows this, particularly since Elena is far from home and isolated from anyone who might be tempted to take her side. Indeed, the only thing Elena can do is to flee, which is what she does, leaving a note saying that she is departing -- but, significantly, without revealing the cause. Sarratore's advances toward Elena, as with Melina, prove essentially risk free for him.

Far from being harmless, then, this power imbalance sets Sarratore up as a serial adulterer who does not have to fear any consequences for his bad behavior. The women whom he targets, however, are not so lucky-- setting up the implicit criticism of the novel toward this unequal status between men and women. Melina, in particular, suffers greatly through her encounter with Sarratore. After Sarratore leaves the neighborhood to escape her now-unwelcome attentions, Melina becomes even more unstable-- making a fool of herself as she hurls objects from her apartment window at the moving cart of the departing Sarratore family on the day of their move, weeping and wailing like an animal. Likewise, already in a precarious financial position before the affair, afterward Melina has to take on even more back-breaking domestic work to feed her family, and without Sarratore's inspiring attention, poverty begins to consume her, breaking her spirit and accentuating the already fragile nature of her mental health. Melina's one happiness is when (some months after his departure from the neighborhood) she receives Sarratore's published book of poems with its dedication to her, but of course, while this might assuage any guilt Sarratore feels about the situation, it only encourages Melina further in the false hope that he will return to her. In short, Sarratore uses Melina for his own purposes and discards her when she is no longer convenient, leaving her in a demonstrably worse position than when he began courting her attention. Unlike her, however, his reputation and authority remains intact. Though the consequences for Elena are not as dramatic (given that she does not acquiesce in the same way as Melina), they nonetheless cause her mental anguish as she is simultaneously disgusted by Sarratore's unexpected sexual assault and momentarily aroused by the physical encounter with him. Later, when Sarratore starts returning to the neighborhood in pursuit of her, she is also alarmed by uncertainty about what he will do to her or how far he will go to achieve his aims. Only through the intercession of Elena's boyfriend Antonio (who is also Melina's eldest son) is Sarratore convinced to finally leave Elena in peace. The important thing to notice here is that Elena, like Melina, is powerless to stop Sarratore on her own, as both women are marginal characters within the neighborhood-- Melina because she is a single woman that no one takes seriously and Elena because she is young. More than this, though, they are powerless by virtue of being female. In this context, only a man is capable of standing up to Sarratore, and indeed, Antonio has to threaten Sarratore with physical violence before he permanently leaves the neighborhood. Women, in this world,

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are incapable of meeting power with power and, as a result, are at the mercy of men who can exploit them with impunity.

In this way, Donato Sarratore is representative of the exploitive male within the novel. Though his own status in the neighborhood's working-class masculine culture is negligible (due to his intellectual predilections), he is still able to manipulate and dominate women simply because he is male, and when there are consequences to bear for his actions, they are paid exclusively by his female targets: Melina with further marginalization and neurosis and Elena with guilt and anxiety. Thus, Ferrante documents how in this society, sanctioned by custom and convention, women are constrained to passivity-- free to react, but not to take action when faced with male power-- since action and authority are exclusively male prerogatives. As a result, women lack the agency to either challenge or transcend their situations, perpetuating a culture of victimhood that maintains these invisible chains of patriarchal control.