

### **Sample Essay One**

In the story “Yellow Fish,” the main character is never directly described or mentioned. The reader must infer everything except their name, Anu. The author creates the character through reflections and other various techniques.

Throughout the story, the writer uses very choppy sentences, as well as fragments, to represent Anu’s stream of consciousness. By doing this, the writer gives her a timid, scarred personality. By limiting the sentence structure, Ambai indirectly leads the reader to believe that Anu is depressed, and has faced tragedy in her life. The author does this to foreshadow the reflection on Anu’s loss of her child.

The reflection itself also serves purpose to the author. Anu says, “The mouth of the urn. Open it” (54). This statement is indicative of some level of shock Anu is experiencing. By giving Anu these lines, Ambai reveals to the reader that Anu is absolutely traumatized by this occurrence, and felt as if the ashes in the urn were somehow still connected to the lost child. The author reveals this instance to portray to the reader *why* Anu is the way that she has portrayed her to this point in the story.

Finally, Ambai uses the yellow fish to show Anu’s sense of closure. By giving the fish similar characteristics to Anu’s lost daughter, the author creates an idea of salvation. By saving the fish, and sending it out into the sea, Ambai conveys to the audience that Anu feels her daughter is in a better place now. The fish takes “an arrogant leap” (79), which finalizes the idea that Anu feels that way. The author provides this closure to provide similar closure to the story. With Anu’s revitalization, the story comes to an end.

Ambai creates the character Anu through a series of choppy sentences, a reflection as well as a metaphor. She takes her readers on a journey through tragedy, depression, and ultimately closure. These traits make Anu relatable and make the reader incredibly sympathetic to her.

### **Sample Essay Two**

Tamil writer Ambai’s “Yellow Fish” is ostensibly a short story about a woman on a summer outing at the beach. Seeing a discarded fish unsuitable for commercial use, the narrator, in an act of empathy and concern, convinces one of the local fishermen to return the dying animal back to its ocean home. In characterizing this empathy of the narrator, however, Ambai makes a larger claim for an interconnection between all living things.

Paradoxically, the narrator’s empathy is established initially through setting rather than indirect characterization. The reader perceives events through the eyes of the narrator before the reader ever realizes the story is a first person narration; indeed, the first use of the “I” pronoun does not occur until the approximate midpoint of the narrative (32). Description is revealed in short declarative sentences that place the reader into the sense world of the protagonist. Notice, for example, how “*the eye is compelled by the sea alone*” (4), or “*the saris press upon the eyes gently*” (25-26), as the reader, in at least some sense, *becomes* the narrator, or at least her eyes and ears as she traverses the beach. Not only are the images detailed in terms of the sense organ that perceives them, they are perceived as if the reader is the one experiencing them-- a hypothetical eye that is not yet identified with a specific point of view becoming, by default, the reader’s eye. Even more explicit is the introduction of the second person “you,” used to describe what the reader sees (“fish filling the nets” [15-16]) where the reader becomes, at least temporarily, the protagonist, at least until the main character is introduced explicitly. In this way, the reader is attuned to seeing the world through the gaze of

another, perceives it as the narrator, thus allowing insight into the world she inhabits. In other words, the seemingly objective world of the protagonist’s vision (locked in a specific time and place) is experienced subjectively by the reader by immersion into a world that the reader would not normally inhabit.

This is important because it is precisely what the narrator does when she imagines the pain of the fish. She does this in a manner similar to the opening paragraphs, paragraphs in which the reader had been forced into the world of another. In the narrator’s case, however, she connects the death throes of the fish with the death of her own child. The fish is described as a mouth that “gasps and closes ... [shuddering] and [tossing] on the hot sand” (34-35), just as her own premature child would “open and close her mouth, as if suckling” (44-45) in the incubator, fighting for breath. Likewise, the fish has arisen from the sea, as the infant Jalaja means “she who rises from the waters” (42), making the identification explicit. The final connection, though, is to the “mouth” (52) of the child’s funeral urn that “contains only ashes” (55), for if the fish is not returned to the water, it, like Jalajal, will die. What happens, in short, is a metaphorical substitution that allows for the connection between person and fish, that, on some level, the infant and the fish become one, as the narrator, in a moment of clarity, remembers the grief at her own loss and transfers it to the hypothetical death of the fish. Not only are things connected in terms of the associations connoted by the images, they are conceived in terms of one another, suggestive of both a cyclical interrelationship (in terms of one thing becoming another) and a blurring of point of view, since there is no privileged place of perception. Rather, each temporary identity (child, urn with ashes, fish) is an arbitrary point on a larger continuum.

This implied interrelationship between all things-- the Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain concept of samsara-- is created through an awakening perception in the characterization of the protagonist. The reader experiences this lifeworld initially through the description of the setting, becoming, in essence, the narrator’s surrogate. This in turn creates the precondition whereby the reader understands the protagonist’s own point-of-view transference when conflating fish with child. The woman’s empathy, like the reader’s, arises from seeing the world through the filter of another perception, clarified in the end when Ambai writes, “*You* can see its clear yellow for a very long time” (80-81), recursively returning the reader to the subjectively experienced setting of the beginning of the story. Reader, protagonist, fish, child: all are part of the same interconnected web of being, as the narrator’s empathy becomes the reader’s own, allowing for the spiritual epiphany that *all are one*.

### **Sample Essay Three**

In the story “Yellow Fish” by Ambai, the author characterizes the protagonist through nostalgic imagery, comparisons, and a sense of helplessness. By combining a mix of scenic metaphors with real-to-life character events, Ambai tells a sad story that can only be fully understood by reading deeper into what each detail means in the protagonist’s (Anu’s) character.

Ambai writes with a great deal of nostalgic imagery. She paints the picture of her protagonist as someone who has lost a baby shortly after its birth through a series of flashbacks. When discussing the sand on beach, Ambai stresses its hotness and how much of it there is, which can be made to resemble how the ashes of the child tossed into the sea were not important to the rest of the world, only to the protagonist. This creates a feeling that the main character is very isolated. This isolation is also seen in the description of the fisher men and women. The women are all dressed so brightly in contrast to the “ash grey sea” (13), showing how the protagonist’s world at the sea is

separated from the rest of that society. The word “ash” in the “ash grey sea” is also an interesting choice when it comes into play later that the baby’s ashes now rested in the ocean.

In that same vein, Ambai also uses a great deal of comparisons. The fact that the fish is yellow is no coincidence, as the people in that region of the world are also said to be yellow-skinned. The fish obviously represents the baby in this story, too, as seen in how both gasped for life giving oxygen. All of the feelings the audience infers that Anu has for the fish are felt for the child as well. The author also writes how the fish is helpless (76), much like Anu’s baby. By giving all of these feelings to Anu, the audience gets the sense that Anu is filled with grief and pain.

Finally, Ambai gives Anu the trait of not fully being self-sustaining or capable. Anu is never able to provide for either the fish or Jalajal to keep them alive. When Jalaja is dying, Anu had to wait outside of her room, not able to do anything. When the yellow fish is dying, Anu is not even able to pick it up and throw it into the sea. This might connect back to the throwing of the ashes into the sea, as Anu might have too much sorrow. Not that she does not want to help; she tries a variety of tactics to help the yellow fish, but is ultimately handicapped in this regard. Ambai writes this to show how Anu is a caring person who has compassion on helpless creatures, but is helpless herself when it comes to fixing things.

In the end, Anu is a mother who has suffered the loss of her child. By describing her actions with the fish, Ambai leads the audience to believe Anu is a woman who is trying to compensate for a failure that was not necessarily hers, and wants to make up for it in any way, even if the life she saves is only that of a fish.

#### **Sample Essay Four**

The author characterizes the protagonist as someone who is sentimental, compassionate, and very sad about the loss of their child through the use of detailed descriptions and comparisons.

At the beginning of the story, the narrator describes the bright colors as “blinding,” “demonic,” “profound”, and “assaulting.” By using these words with generally negative connotations, the reader would begin to see that the main character obviously has negative/sad sentiments related to the sea. By making the main character come off as having bad or sad experiences, the author is trying to get her audience to feel sympathy for the protagonist.

The author continues to paint the main character as sentimental and sad when she parallels the yellow dying fish on the sand to that of when her newborn daughter died. She compared and likened the fish’s round eyes to that of her daughter’s and the fish gasping for air to how her daughter open and close her mouth as if sucking. The character even likens the color of the “ash grey sea” to that of her child’s ashes. This would cause the audience to see the main character’s sadness and sentimentality and cause them to sympathize with her.

Lastly, the author reveals the main character’s compassionate side when they ask a fisherboy to throw the dying yellow fish back into the sea. By saving the sick old fish that was undesirable, the main character would now seem like a kind person that did not want to see another being suffer as her daughter had. By characterizing the main character as compassionate, the author would further succeed in getting the audience to sympathize with her. It is easier to sympathize with someone who appears kind and undeserving of pain than to someone who comes off otherwise.

**Sample Essay Five**

As hypothesized by father of modern psychology Sigmund Freud, repression is the mind's defense mechanism, whereby unpalatable feeling, desires, and memories are (at least partially) submerged in the unconscious mind. This idea helps to explain how humans cope with psychological trauma, as it would be impossible to healthily function if all slights, failures, and disappointments were continuously experienced as acutely as when such emotions first occurred. In the short story “Yellow Fish,” Tamil writer Ambai documents such a process, since the protagonist Anu grieves for her daughter Jalaja, who has died from complications due to her premature birth. Seen through a Freudian lens, the story is about the process of coming to terms with tragedy in a way that allows for the possibility of reconnection with life-- the narrator recovering a healthier balance between the internalization of her trauma and her external interaction with the exterior world.

When the reader first encounters Anu, this balance is askew, as she is alienated from her setting. For instance, when encountering a commercial fishing operation on the beach, Anu perceives the brilliant “collage of colours” (27) of the fisherwomen's saris as intrusive-- defined more by their ability to wound than their capacity to delight the senses. This is why the colors blind and assault (20-21), as they “press upon the eyes” (25-26). Instead of enlivening the sand that “spreads like a desert” (3-4), or favorably contrasting with a “faded,” “ash grey” (12-13), and “shrunken” (3) sea, Anu perceives the colorful saris as “profound”-- even “demonic” (10-11). The implication is that she longs for the neutral and uninflected and that vibrancy is perceived as threat (as opposed to comfort or inspiration). In this, Ambai describes a woman living with a partially repressed grief experienced in the wake of her loss. Disconnected from life as it actually is (colorful and vibrant), Anu experiences life as drained of meaning (colorless and drab). Even the grammar suggests this. Though actually a first person narration, the word “I” first occurs halfway through the story-- when Anu encounters the discarded yellow fish languishing on the sand. Until this moment, Ambai exclusively uses third (and even second) person pronouns-- though the perceptions are clearly from a single point-of-view of a (as yet unidentified) character. Instead of Anu placing herself into her own story (inserting herself as the “I” in the narration), the language choices keep her at a remove: someone who simply observes without interacting (signified by the comparatively objective third person perceptions). Initially, then, Anu is a woman who seemingly lacks a personal connection to the vital setting surrounding her.

That the encounter with the yellow fish is the impetus whereby Anu begins her reintegration into the world is no accident, since she perceives a connection between the fish and her deceased infant Jalaja. If, in the aftermath of trauma, Ana feels isolated and alone, it would, according to Freud, be a perfectly natural response. The acute grief one feels at the origin of trauma cannot continue to be experienced with the same intensity if one is to productively function in daily life. Instead, such feelings are partially submerged in the repository that makes up the unconscious mind. Such a process begins almost immediately-- analogous to the way that the mind blunts the sting of physical pain after the initial experience of material trauma. Indeed, evidence of this process occurs in the story, as the grieving Anu, when confronted with the funeral urn holding Jalaja's ashes, responds with “loud racking sobs” (59)-- yet the sentence lacks a subject, an “I” that connects Anu to the experience in her memory. In other words, the alienation (signified by the language choice), begins almost instantaneously, as if confronting unmediated pain is too difficult for her to bear. At the same time, the process of healing, facilitated in the story by Anu's successful attempts to save the yellow fish, is similarly quick, since Anu displaces some of her grief for Jalaja onto the dying fish. Both entities, for instance, have a mouth that “closes and opens” (38), both gasping for breath. In making this

connection, then, Anu reinserts herself back into the world by discerning an opportunity to save the fish in a way that she could not with her daughter. When Anu accomplishes this task, returning the yellow fish to the sea with the aid of a fisherboy, the yellow of the fish becomes “clear” (80), rather than the pale or withered color of her earlier perception (31). In a similar way, the sea into which the fish returns is now “blue-grey-white” and no longer desiccated or redolent of death-- the “ash grey” (13) color at the beginning of the story. Hence, in displacing the object of the partially repressed grief onto the fish, her changed perception of color indicate a change in outlook. Anu is able to once again see herself as part of the world in its infinite variety; it no longer oppresses her mind or spirit. In this way, Freud would suggest how her psyche has more successfully integrated the grief into the unconscious, allowing Anu to once more healthily interact with her surroundings.

Thus, Anu’s character arc move from grief to acceptance through a Freudian process of repression, enabling the character to reconnect with the world of the living. Of course, it is glib to suggest that this process represents a triumph over tragedy, since Anu’s negative feelings are not so completely repressed that she has forgotten her grief. What does happen, though, is that Anu no longer fixates on her trauma, evidenced by how (at story’s end) she no longer experiences the world through the lens of her tragedy (or at least to the same degree). She sees, in other words, the possibility of transcending tragedy or, at the very least, making peace with it. It is in this way that Ambai suggests the healing power of solidarity with others (personified in Anu’s empathetic connection with the yellow fish), since isolation traps individuals into modes of thinking that only result in anxiety and stress of personal trauma. In such a view, though the world may be an intermittently tragic place, at the same time, it contains within it the means to embrace hope, rather than despair-- life, rather than death.