

## Section II

## Question One

(Suggested time—40 minutes. This question counts as one-third of the total essay section score.)

In this passage a woman looking at photographs of her childhood reflects upon the impact of emigration upon her family. Read the passage carefully. Then, in a well-organized essay, identify the nature of the cultural rifts caused by relocation and show how the author's rich use of language conveys them.

- (5) But what about my mother? Like opposite aspects of the same person: my mother, my grandmother's shadow. Here, she's smiling, though not broadly. Her children are gone, but her mother's there, telling her *aguántate, cálmate*,<sup>1</sup> as they sit over *café*.<sup>2</sup> Or maybe she's relieved. It is, after all, the first time since their marriage that she and my father are alone, like newlyweds. But suddenly a kitchen towel,
- (10) embroidered with the day of the week, *martes*,<sup>3</sup> and smeared with another woman's lipstick, flies from my mother's hand, lands like an open book by my father's mud-caked boots.
- (15) In this photograph, a coffee-dark V shows through the collar of her dress, evidence of the enforced labor in the cane fields since the revolution. Above her head is a wall vase filled with plastic flowers, hanging under the framed painting of a saint, who can't be seen above the
- (20) melted-chocolate folds of a robe, and above that, perhaps, two hands are held palms up, checking the spiritual weather. But the hands are outside the photograph, just like my hands, which can't touch my mother at that brief oasis,
- (25) or my grandmother, right before she turned and left with the shadow.
- (30) Grandmother left so abruptly, left my mother in mid-sentence, fingering the legendary length of fabric her mother had once transformed into the Miracle of the Three Dresses. Alone, she collapsed into her mother's absence like a slave into bed at the end of the day.
- (35) Then one afternoon two years later the air of her kitchen spun like someone whirling toward her, and she knew something had happened to her son: locked in a mental ward at sixteen after chasing his foster mother around the
- (40) block with a kitchen knife. He had dropped out of high school, washed dishes for a living. Sporting long sideburns, he rewarded himself first with a round-backed two-toned Chevy, then a series of garish Mustangs. Married to his fate, he left a trail of cars, each wrapped like a wedding ring around a telephone pole.
- (45) A vision of her oldest daughter—forever regretting she hadn't been born into a TV family—flashed thin against the white walls of college, her body a blade sharpened to sever the question from the answer. Her face a glossy ad of the ideal American living room.
- (50) In the newspaper photo above the caption “Family of Cuban Expatriates Reunited Here,” I am the only one gazing at the camera, my face twisted into a complex curiosity. Two years on my own among strangers had only taught me how to be one. I stood, my first tongue ripped out, with my mother's wet, round cheek pressed to the top of my head. The dark flag of her mustache. Their sour smell, like clothes trapped in a hamper. Emblems of the exile. While bureaucrats toyed with their time and their fate, my parents had waited, uncomplaining, afraid.
- (55) But I didn't know that back then. I placed myself instead in the camera lens, looking back at the spectacle we made in the bus station. Under my skin, the rice fields of my hometown were flooding the place of language. Though my mother pulled me toward her with one arm,
- (60) she scooped up only watery absence; my body had long since drifted downriver. My mother's face in this photograph, captured by a stranger, betrays the weight of emptiness in her arms.
- (65)
- (70)

<sup>1</sup> (Sp) hold on; stay calm

<sup>2</sup> (Sp) coffee

<sup>3</sup> (Sp) Tuesday

**Précis and Explication for Free-Response Question One:  
From Aleida Rodriguez’s “My Mother in Two Photographs”**

Free-Response Question One asks students to consider part of an essay called “My Mother in Two Photographs” that is about her childhood memories of emigrating from Cuba to America, and, upon completion, to “identify the nature of the cultural rifts caused by relocation and show how the author’s rich use of language conveys them.” The essay is not so much a progression of paragraphs as it is a series of short vignettes (in the vein of Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street*) that provides subtle insights into the problems encountered by immigrants in America. The two photographs—one of the mother she left behind in Cuba, the other of the mother reunited with her children in America—trigger the speaker’s flashbacks and reflections on her mother’s life as well as the effect of assimilation upon her and her siblings. The passage is replete with interesting language, including expressions in her native language, images of hard work and strong religious faith, cultural allusions (both Cuban and American), and eloquent similes and metaphors.

In the first paragraph the author sees her mother being told to remain calm by the author’s grandmother. Perhaps she is worried about the children who have been sent to America, or perhaps by the “kitchen towel, embroidered with the day of the week, *martes*, and smeared with another woman’s lipstick” (lines 9-12), the towel that she clutches in her hand until her husband comes home, then flings it “like an open book” at her husband’s mud-caked boots (lines 12-13). The simple but effective simile reveals the mother’s silent but certain indictment of her husband’s betrayal. The second paragraph (the first to include a photograph) and the third paragraph initially focus on two details: the collar of the mother’s sweat-soaked dress, and the statue of a saint “who can’t be seen above the melted-chocolate folds of a robe, and above that, perhaps, two hands are held palms up, checking the spiritual weather” (lines 19-22). This implies the divorce between the reality of earthly labor and the potential of spiritual reward in that the saint seems oblivious to the suffering below, gazing upwards not down and seemingly more concerned with the weather than with the prayers for his intercession from below. The latter part of the paragraph conveys the speaker’s frustration that she cannot touch her mother or see her grandmother before she died. The grandmother’s death also impacts the author’s mother, who is left alone with an adulterous husband and a family a culture away. The reference to the grandmother’s having once transformed a piece of fabric into “The Miracle of the Three Dresses” (lines 29-30) suggests a miraculous engineering of a little into much, similar to the parable of Jesus and the loaves and fishes. The simile of her mother’s collapsing “like a slave into bed at the end of day” (lines 31-32) shows the physical and emotional toll that the grandmother’s death takes upon her.

Occurring two years later, the fourth paragraph again features her mother having to confront tragedy: this time that of her son who has been “locked in a mental ward at sixteen after chasing his foster mother around the block with a kitchen knife” (lines 36-38). Having dropped out of school and taken a menial job, he buys himself a series of fancy cars before leaving them “wrapped like a wedding ring around a telephone pole” (lines 43-44). This implies that the fracture of the family structure by the emigration led to her son’s forsaking education for a life of risk and violence, then suffering incarceration for his actions. Similarly, the fifth paragraph provides a brief vignette of her eldest daughter who has gone on to college but forsaken her Cuban heritage, “forever regretting she hadn’t been born into a TV family” (lines 45-47), “Her face a glossy ad of the ideal American living room” (lines 49-50). The images and choice of detail in this section—in particular, the hairstyle and cars—suggest the ready assimilation of the children into American teenage culture.

The concluding two paragraphs focus on the second photograph but from very different perspectives. In lines 51-63, the speaker alludes to a newspaper photograph of her family's being reunited in America. She is, however, embarrassed by the reunion, ashamedly admitting that "Two years on my own among strangers had only taught me how to be one" (lines 54-56). A stranger in a strange land, the author now ironically notes the 'foreignness' of her Cuban family: "I stood, my first tongue ripped out, with my mother's wet, round cheek pressed to the top of my head. The dark flag of her mustache. Their sour smell, like clothes trapped in a hamper. Emblems of the exile" (lines 56-61). Her mother's emotional caress is subordinated by the hair on her lip and the funky smell of her clothes, the speaker realizes how much she has assimilated when she remarks "Though my mother pulled me toward her with one arm, she scooped up only watery absence; my body had long drifted downriver" (lines 68-71). Like the archetypal Huck Finn, she has left her home physically and culturally behind her, and her remark "My mother's face in this photograph, captured by a stranger, betrays the weight of emptiness in her arms" (lines 71-73) conveys this severance. Though she may be physically represented in the photo, she has forsaken her Cuban heritage and language for that of a brave new world.

Rodriguez's unique essay allows students to study the cultural rifts that can be caused by emigration, including physical separation, issues with employment and crime, a weakening of the familial bond, and a forfeiture of one's original culture caused by assimilation into a new one. The author does not seem proud of these developments, but in the final scene she does seem resigned to these changes, if a little guilty over succumbing to them.

**Scoring Guide for Free-Response Question One:  
From Aleida Rodriguez’s “My Mother in Two Photographs”**

- 9 Essays earning a score of 9 meet all the criteria for 8 papers and in addition are especially thorough in their analysis or demonstrate a particularly impressive control of style.
  - 8 Essays earning a score of 8 effectively identify the nature of the cultural rifts caused by relocation and show how the author’s rich use of language conveys them. They present a carefully reasoned argument in support of their position and enlist appropriate evidence from the text that supports it. Their prose demonstrates an impressive control of the elements of effective writing, though it is not flawless.
  - 7 Essays earning a score of 7 fit the description of 6 essays but feature either more purposeful arguments or a greater command of prose style.
  - 6 Essays scoring 6 accurately identify the nature of the cultural rifts caused by relocation and show how the author’s rich use of language conveys them. Their arguments, while generally sound in nature and adequately supported, are nevertheless not as persuasive as papers earning a score of 7 or better due to their being less developed or less cogent. Though these papers may also feature lapses in diction or syntax, they nevertheless contain the insight and composition skills that characterize a paper in the upper-half.
  - 5 Essays scoring 5 generally understand the task, but are either limited in scope or insufficiently developed. Though they may be marked by errors in syntax or in diction, they nevertheless reflect a certain level of competence.
  - 4 Essays scoring 4 respond inadequately to the question’s task, often misunderstanding, misrepresenting, or oversimplifying the cultural rifts caused by relocation and/or failing to show how the author’s rich use of language conveys them. Though their prose is often adequate enough to convey their writers’ claims, it generally suggests a limited control over organization, diction, or syntax.
  - 3 Essays earning a score of 3 meet the criteria for a score of 4, but are either less persuasive or display a more limited control over the elements of effective composition.
  - 2 Essays scoring 2 achieve little success in identifying the cultural rifts caused by relocation or in showing how the author’s rich use of language conveys them. They may on occasion misread the passage, fail to develop their arguments to any substantive level, summarize rather than analyze the passage, or display significant weaknesses in organization, clarity, fluency or mechanics.
  - 1 Essays earning a score of 1 meet the criteria for a score of 2 but are either overly simplistic or marred by severe deficiencies in the elements of composition.
  - 0 Essays scoring 0 offer an off-topic response that receives no credit, or a mere repetition of the prompt.
- Indicates a blank or completely off-topic response.