

1997 ENGLISH LITERATURE

Question 2 (Suggested time—40 minutes. This

question counts as one-third of the total essay section score.)

Read carefully the following passage from Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, a novel about the relocation of Japanese Canadians to internment camps during the Second World War.

Then, in a well-organized essay, analyze how changes in perspective and style reflect the narrator's complex attitude toward the past. In your analysis, consider literary elements such as point of view, structure, selection of detail, and figurative language.

1942.

We are leaving the B.C. coast—rain, cloud, mist—
an air overladen with weeping. Behind us lies a salty sea,
line within which swim our drowning specks of memory —
(5) our small waterlogged eulogies. We are going down to
the middle of the Earth with pick-axe eyes, tunneling by
train to the interior, carried along by the momentum of
the expulsion into the waiting wilderness.

We are hammers and chisels in the hands of would-be
(10) sculptors, battering the spirit of the sleeping mountain.

We are the chips and sand, the fragments of fragments
that fly like arrows from the heart of the rock. We are
the silences that speak from stone. We are the despised
rendered voiceless, stripped of car, radio, camera and
(15) every means of communication, a trainload of eyes
covered with mud and spittle. We are the man in the
Gospel of John, born into the world for the sake of the
light. We are sent to Siloam, the pool called "Sent." We
are sent to the sending, that we may bring sight. We are
(20) the scholarly and the illiterate, the envied and the ugly,
the fierce and the docile. We are those pioneers who
cleared the bush and the forest with our hands, the gar-
deners tending and attending the soil with our tenderness,
the fishermen who are flung from the sea to flounder in
(25) the dust of the prairies.

We are the Issei and the Nisei and the Sansei*, the
Japanese Canadians. We disappear into the future unde-
manding as dew.

The memories are dream images. A pile of luggage in
(30) a large hall. Missionaries at the railway station handing
out packages of toys. Stephen being carried on board
the train, a white cast up to his thigh.

It is three decades ago and I am a small child resting
my head in Obasan's lap. I am wearing a wine-coloured
(35) dirndl skirt with straps that criss-cross at the back. My
white silk blouse has a Peter Pan collar dotted with tiny
red flowers. I have a wine-colored sweater with ivory
duck buttons.

Stephen sits sideways on a seat by himself opposite
(40) us, his huge white leg like a cocoon.

The train is full of strangers. But even strangers are
addressed as "ojisan" or "obasan," meaning uncle or
aunt. Not one uncle or aunt, grandfather or grandmothe
brother or sister, not one of us on this journey returns
(45) home again.

The train smells of oil and soot and orange peels ant
lurches groggily as we rock our way inland. Along the
window ledge, the black soot leaps and settles like
insects. Underfoot and in the aisles and beside us on the
(50) seats we are surrounded by odd bits of luggage—bags,
lunch baskets, blankets, pillows. My red umbrella with
its knobby clear red handle sticks out of a box like the
head of an exotic bird. In the seat behind us is a boy in
short gray pants and jacket carrying a wooden slatted
(55) box with a tabby kitten inside. He is trying to distract
the kitten with his finger but the kitten mews and
mews, its mouth opening and closing. I can barely hear
its high steady cry in the clackity-clack and steamy hiss
of the train.

A few seats in front, one young woman is sitting
with her narrow shoulders hunched over a tiny red-
faced baby. Her short black hair falls into her birdlike
face. She is so young, I would call her "o-nesan," older
sister.

The woman in the aisle seat opposite us leans over
and whispers to Obasan with a solemn nodding of her
head and a flicker of her eyes indicating the young
woman.

Obasan moves her head slowly and gravely in a nod
(70) as she listens. "Kawaiso," she says under her breath.
The word is used whenever there is hurt and a need for
tenderness.

The young mother, Kuniko-san, came from
Saltspnng Island, the woman says. Kuniko-san was
(75) rushed onto the train from Hastings Park, a few days

The Issei, Nisei, and Sansei are, respectively, first-, second-, and
third-generation Japanese Canadians.