

A Christmas Memory

Short Story by Truman Capote

What do you look for in a **FRIEND**?

COMMON CORE

RL 4 Analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone. **RL 5** Analyze an author's choices concerning how to manipulate time.

Think about your current friends as well as friends from the past. What draws you to someone and creates that special bond of friendship? Does a friend have to be your age? Do you always share the same interests and values? "A Christmas Memory" shows how important friendship can be to two very different individuals.

QUICKWRITE With a partner, write a "top ten" list of the key qualities you look for in a friend. Then compare your list with those of your classmates. Does everyone list similar qualities? Are physical traits and intellectual or emotional factors equally important?



PEANUTS.



Peanuts: © United Feature Syndicate, Inc.

● TEXT ANALYSIS: DETAILS OF SETTING

In “A Christmas Memory,” the adult narrator focuses on describing a particular period in his childhood. In fact, the narrator seems more interested in recreating the **setting** of this period than in telling about events. Through the use of **details**, the narrator describes not only the time and place of his childhood but also the historical era—the buildings, people, customs, and rituals that existed. The richness of the details makes the setting seem real and helps readers understand its importance to the narrator. Notice the vivid words used to describe walking through the woods:

Always, the path unwinds through lemony sun pools and pitch-black vine tunnels.

As you read, look for details that reveal the setting.

● READING SKILL: ANALYZE IMAGERY

Good descriptive writing is usually filled with **imagery**—words and phrases that appeal to the senses. Capote gives readers a lasting impression of a holiday memory by using language that appeals to one or more senses. For example, note how this phrase appeals to your sense of hearing:

Lovely dimes, the liveliest coin, the one that really jingles.

As you read, use a chart like the one below to jot down specific words and phrases that you find especially striking. Check off the senses that are appealed to in each case.

Description	Sight	Smell	Hearing	Taste	Touch
Cracking open the pecans	✓		✓	✓	

Review: Make Inferences

▲ VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

To see how many words you know, restate each phrase, using a different word or words for the boldfaced word.

1. to **inaugurate** a project
2. a day that **exhilarates**
3. party **paraphernalia**
4. **squander** your money
5. ordinary, **prosaic** ideas
6. **suffuse** with perfume
7. a **potent** medicine
8. **goad** her to action
9. **cavort** in the park
10. **sever** all contact

Truman Capote

1924–1984

Early Ambitions

Raised by elderly relatives in a small Alabama town, Capote started writing to fill the loneliness. He began publishing his short stories in his teens. As he later explained, “I always knew that I wanted to be a writer and that I wanted to be rich and famous.” By the time his first novel, *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, was published in 1948, he was on his way to achieving these goals.

The Nonfiction Novel

Capote enjoyed the celebrity that followed other successful publications, including the novel *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (1958). Then his career took a dramatic turn when he began what he called a nonfiction novel, a factual story written in the form of a novel. The result, *In Cold Blood* (1965), was an instant bestseller and made him a multimillionaire. Still, the six years he spent on this book took a toll on him.

Personal Decline

Capote’s life ultimately descended into a haze of addiction, illness, and writer’s block. Although some critics contend he threw away his talent in the pursuit of celebrity, most acknowledge his talent as a storyteller.

BACKGROUND TO THE STORY

The Facts Behind the Fiction

This story is based on Capote’s childhood during the Great Depression of the 1930s. His friend was a much older cousin named Sook Faulk. Writing in the voice of an adult, Capote condenses years of experiences with his cousin into one memorable Christmas.

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Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

M Christmas Memory

Truman Capote



Imagine a morning in late November. A coming of winter morning more than twenty years ago. Consider the kitchen of a spreading old house in a country town. A great black stove is its main feature; but there is also a big round table and a fireplace with two rocking chairs placed in front of it. Just today the fireplace commenced its seasonal roar.

A woman with shorn white hair is standing at the kitchen window. She is wearing tennis shoes and a shapeless gray sweater over a summery calico dress. She is small and sprightly, like a bantam hen; but, due to a long youthful illness, her shoulders are pitifully hunched. Her face is remarkable—not
10 unlike Lincoln's, craggy like that, and tinted by sun and wind; but it is delicate too, finely boned, and her eyes are sherry-colored and timid. "Oh my," she exclaims, her breath smoking the windowpane, "it's fruitcake weather!"

The person to whom she is speaking is myself. I am seven; she is sixty-something. We are cousins, very distant ones, and we have lived together—well, as long as I can remember. Other people inhabit the house, relatives; and though they have power over us, and frequently make us cry, we are not, on the whole, too much aware of them. We are each other's best friend. She calls me Buddy, in memory of a boy who was formerly her best friend. The other Buddy died in the 1880's, when she was still a child. She is still a child.

20 "I knew it before I got out of bed," she says, turning away from the window with a purposeful excitement in her eyes. "The courthouse bell sounded so cold and clear. And there were no birds singing; they've gone to warmer country, yes indeed. Oh, Buddy, stop stuffing biscuit and fetch our buggy. Help me find my hat. We've thirty cakes to bake."

It's always the same: a morning arrives in November, and my friend, as though officially **inaugurating** the Christmas time of year that **exhilarates** her imagination and fuels the blaze of her heart, announces: "It's fruitcake weather! Fetch our buggy. Help me find my hat." **A**

Analyze Visuals ▶

How does the woman in this painting compare with your image of Buddy's friend? Cite details from the story, such as the sensory language in lines 6–11, to support your answer.

inaugurate (īn-ô'gyə-rāt') v. to make a formal beginning of

exhilarate (ĭg-zīl'ə-rāt') v. to make merry or lively

A DETAILS OF SETTING

Use the details on this page to figure out as much as you can about the setting.



The hat is found, a straw cartwheel corsaged with velvet roses out-of-doors
30 has faded: it once belonged to a more fashionable relative. Together, we guide
our buggy, a dilapidated baby carriage, out to the garden and into a grove of
pecan trees. The buggy is mine; that is, it was bought for me when I was born.
It is made of wicker, rather unraveled, and the wheels wobble like a drunkard's
legs. But it is a faithful object; springtimes, we take it to the woods and fill
it with flowers, herbs, wild fern for our porch pots; in the summer, we pile it
with picnic **paraphernalia** and sugar-cane fishing poles and roll it down to the
edge of a creek; it has its winter uses, too: as a truck for hauling firewood from
the yard to the kitchen, as a warm bed for Queenie, our tough little orange and
white rat terrier who has survived distemper and two rattlesnake bites. Queenie
40 is trotting beside it now. **B**

Three hours later we are back in the kitchen hulling a heaping buggyload of
windfall pecans. Our backs hurt from gathering them: how hard they were to
find (the main crop having been shaken off the trees and sold by the orchard's
owners, who are not us) among the concealing leaves, the frosted, deceiving
grass. Caarackle! A cheery crunch, scraps of miniature thunder sound as the
shells collapse and the golden mound of sweet oily ivory meat mounts in the
milk-glass bowl. Queenie begs to taste, and now and again my friend sneaks
her a mite, though insisting we deprive ourselves. "We mustn't, Buddy. If
we start, we won't stop. And there's scarcely enough as there is. For thirty
50 cakes." The kitchen is growing dark. Dusk turns the window into a mirror:
our reflections mingle with the rising moon as we work by the fireside in the
firelight. At last, when the moon is quite high, we toss the final hull into the

paraphernalia

(pär'ə-fər-näl'yə) *n.*
the articles needed
for a particular event
or activity

B MAKE INFERENCES

Reread lines 30–40. What
do you learn about Buddy
and his friend from their
activities with the buggy?

Detail of *Wild Dog Mushroom* (1974), Bob Timberlake. © Bob Timberlake.



fire and, with joined sighs, watch it catch flame. The buggy is empty, the bowl is brimful. **C**

We eat our supper (cold biscuits, bacon, blackberry jam) and discuss tomorrow. Tomorrow the kind of work I like best begins: buying. Cherries and citron, ginger and vanilla and canned Hawaiian pineapple, rinds and raisins and walnuts and whiskey and oh, so much flour, butter, so many eggs, spices, flavorings: why, we'll need a pony to pull the buggy home.

60 But before these purchases can be made, there is the question of money. Neither of us has any. Except for skinflint sums persons in the house occasionally provide (a dime is considered very big money); or what we earn ourselves from various activities: holding rummage sales, selling buckets of hand-picked blackberries, jars of homemade jam and apple jelly and peach preserves, rounding up flowers for funerals and weddings. Once we won seventy-ninth prize, five dollars, in a national football contest. Not that we know a fool thing about football. It's just that we enter any contest we hear about: at the moment our hopes are centered on the fifty-thousand-dollar Grand Prize being offered to name a new brand of coffee (we suggested "A.M."; 70 and, after some hesitation, for my friend thought it perhaps sacrilegious, the slogan "A.M.! Amen!"). To tell the truth, our only *really* profitable enterprise was the Fun and Freak Museum we conducted in a back-yard woodshed two summers ago. The Fun was a stereopticon¹ with slide views of Washington and New York lent us by a relative who had been to those places (she was furious when she discovered why we'd borrowed it); the Freak was a three-legged biddy chicken hatched by one of our own hens. Everybody hereabouts wanted to see that biddy: we charged grownups a nickel, kids two cents. And took in a good twenty dollars before the museum shut down due to the decease of the main attraction.

80 But one way and another we do each year accumulate Christmas savings, a Fruitcake Fund. These moneys we keep hidden in an ancient bead purse under a loose board under the floor under a chamber pot under my friend's bed. The purse is seldom removed from this safe location except to make a deposit or, as happens every Saturday, a withdrawal; for on Saturdays I am allowed ten cents to go to the picture show. My friend has never been to a picture show, nor does she intend to: "I'd rather hear you tell the story, Buddy. That way I can imagine it more. Besides, a person my age shouldn't **squander** their eyes. When the Lord comes, let me see him clear." In addition to never having seen a movie, she has never: eaten in a restaurant, traveled more than five miles 90 from home, received or sent a telegram, read anything except funny papers and the Bible, worn cosmetics, cursed, wished someone harm, told a lie on purpose, let a hungry dog go hungry. Here are a few things she has done, does do: killed with a hoe the biggest rattlesnake ever seen in this county (sixteen rattles), dip snuff² (secretly), tame hummingbirds (just try it) till they balance

C ANALYZE IMAGERY

What words and phrases in this passage appeal to the senses and help you imagine the characters shelling pecans?

squander (skwŏn'dər) v.
to spend or use wastefully

1. **stereopticon** (stĕr'ĕ-ŏp'tī-kŏn'): an early slide projector that could merge two images of the same scene on a screen, resulting in a 3-D effect.

2. **dip snuff**: to place a small amount of finely ground tobacco (snuff) in one's mouth.

on her finger, tell ghost stories (we both believe in ghosts) so tingling they chill you in July, talk to herself, take walks in the rain, grow the prettiest japonicas in town, know the recipe for every sort of old-time Indian cure, including a magical wart remover. **D**

Now, with supper finished, we retire to the room in a faraway part of the house where my friend sleeps in a scrap-quilt-covered iron bed painted rose pink, her favorite color. Silently, wallowing in the pleasures of conspiracy, we take the bead purse from its secret place and spill its contents on the scrap quilt. Dollar bills, tightly rolled and green as May buds. Somber fifty-cent pieces, heavy enough to weight a dead man's eyes.³ Lovely dimes, the liveliest coin, the one that really jingles. Nickels and quarters, worn smooth as creek pebbles. But mostly a hateful heap of bitter-odored pennies. Last summer others in the house contracted to pay us a penny for every twenty-five flies we killed. Oh, the carnage of August: the flies that flew to heaven! Yet it was not work in which we took pride. And, as we sit counting pennies, it is as though we were back tabulating dead flies. Neither of us has a head for figures; we count slowly, lose track, start again. According to her calculations, we have \$12.73. According to mine, exactly \$13. "I do hope you're wrong, Buddy. We can't mess around with thirteen. The cakes will fall. Or put somebody in the cemetery. Why, I wouldn't dream of getting out of bed on the thirteenth." This is true: she always spends thirteenths in bed. So, to be on the safe side, we subtract a penny and toss it out the window. **E**

Of the ingredients that go into our fruitcakes, whiskey is the most expensive, as well as the hardest to obtain: State laws forbid its sale. But everybody knows you can buy a bottle from Mr. Haha Jones. And the next day, having completed our more **prosaic** shopping, we set out for Mr. Haha's business address, a "sinful" (to quote public opinion) fish-fry and dancing café down by the river. We've been there before, and on the same errand; but in previous years our dealings have been with Haha's wife, an iodine-dark Indian woman with brassy peroxidized hair and a dead-tired disposition. Actually, we've never laid eyes on her husband, though we've heard that he's an Indian too. A giant with razor scars across his cheeks. They call him Haha because he's so gloomy, a man who never laughs. As we approach his café (a large log cabin festooned inside and out with chains of garish-gay naked light bulbs and standing by the river's muddy edge under the shade of river trees where moss drifts through the branches like gray mist) our steps slow down. Even Queenie stops prancing and sticks close by. People have been murdered in Haha's café. Cut to pieces. Hit on the head. There's a case coming up in court next month. **F**

Naturally these goings-on happen at night when the colored lights cast crazy patterns and the Victrola⁴ wails. In the daytime Haha's is shabby and deserted. I knock at the door, Queenie barks, my friend calls: "Mrs. Haha, ma'am? Anyone to home?" **F**

D MAKE INFERENCES

Reread lines 80–98. What do these details reveal about Buddy's friend?

E ANALYZE IMAGERY

Notice how imagery adds depth to ordinary objects such as coins and dollar bills.

prosaic (prō-zā'ĭk) *adj.*
dull; commonplace

F DETAILS OF SETTING

Reread the description of Mr. Haha's café in lines 119–136. Which specific words and details indicate that the café is a dangerous and "sinful" place?

3. **heavy enough to weight a dead man's eyes:** from the custom of putting coins on the closed eyes of corpses to keep the eyelids from opening.

4. **Victrola:** a trademark for a brand of old record player.

Footsteps. The door opens. Our hearts overturn. It's Mr. Haha Jones himself! And he *is* a giant; he *does* have scars; he *doesn't* smile. No, he glowers at us through Satan-tilted eyes and demands to know: "What you want
140 with Haha?"

For a moment we are too paralyzed to tell. Presently my friend half-finds her voice, a whispery voice at best: "If you please, Mr. Haha, we'd like a quart of your finest whiskey."

His eyes tilt more. Would you believe it? Haha is smiling! Laughing, too. "Which one of you is a drinkin' man?"

"It's for making fruitcakes, Mr. Haha. Cooking."

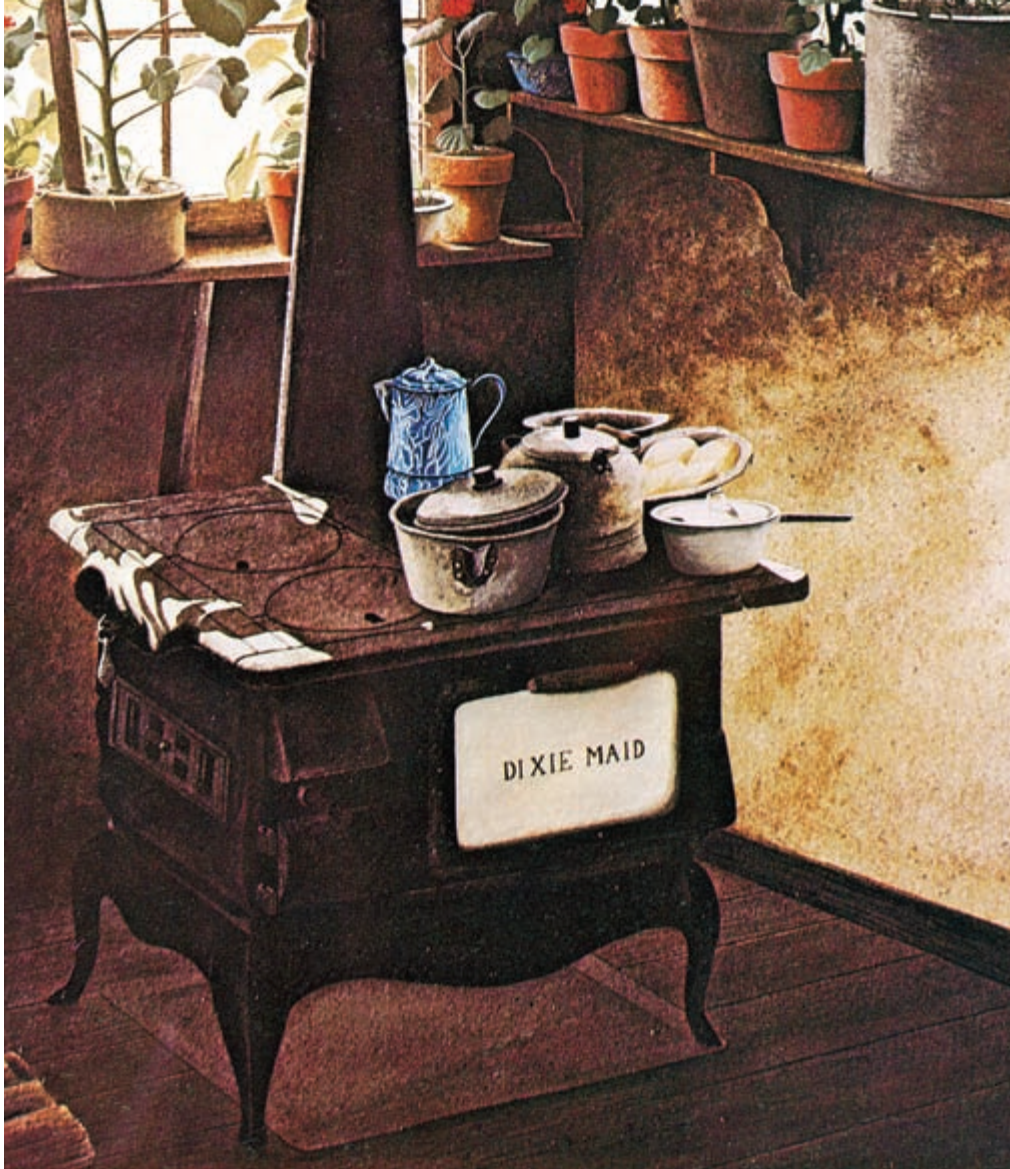
This sobers him. He frowns. "That's no way to waste good whiskey." Nevertheless, he retreats into the shadowed café and seconds later appears carrying a bottle of daisy-yellow unlabeled liquor. He demonstrates its sparkle
150 in the sunlight and says: "Two dollars."

We pay him with nickels and dimes and pennies. Suddenly, as he jangles the coins in his hand like a fistful of dice, his face softens. "Tell you what," he proposes, pouring the money back into our bead purse, "just send me one of them fruitcakes instead."

"Well," my friend remarks on our way home, "there's a lovely man. We'll put an extra cup of raisins in *his* cake."

Detail of *Winter Sun* (1971), Bob Timberlake. © Bob Timberlake.





Mrs. Dorsett's Kitchen (1973), Bob Timberlake. © Bob Timberlake.

The black stove, stoked with coal and firewood, glows like a lighted pumpkin. Eggbeaters whirl, spoons spin round in bowls of butter and sugar, vanilla sweetens the air, ginger spices it; melting, nose-tingling odors saturate the kitchen, **suffuse** the house, drift out to the world on puffs of chimney smoke. In four days our work is done. Thirty-one cakes, dampened with whiskey, bask on windowsills and shelves. **G**

Who are they for?

Friends. Not necessarily neighbor friends: indeed, the larger share is intended for persons we've met maybe once, perhaps not at all. People who've struck our fancy. Like President Roosevelt. Like the Reverend and Mrs. J. C. Lucey, Baptist missionaries to Borneo⁵ who lectured here last winter. Or the little knife grinder who comes through town twice a year. Or Abner Packer, the driver of the six o'clock bus from Mobile, who exchanges waves with us every day as he passes in a dust-cloud whoosh. Or the young Wistons, a

◀ Analyze Visuals

What **details** in this painting evoke the scene described in lines 157–162?

suffuse (sə-fyōōz') v. to gradually spread through or over

G GRAMMAR AND STYLE

Notice how Capote makes use of the **present tense** even though the memory is part of the narrator's past. This creates a sense of immediacy for the reader.

5. **Borneo** (bōr'nē-ō'): a large island in the South China Sea, southwest of the Philippines.

California couple whose car one afternoon broke down outside the house and who spent a pleasant hour chatting with us on the porch (young Mr. Wiston snapped our picture, the only one we've ever had taken). Is it because my friend is shy with everyone *except* strangers that these strangers, and merest acquaintances, seem to us our truest friends? I think yes. Also, the scrapbooks we keep of thank-you's on White House stationery, time-to-time communications from California and Borneo, the knife grinder's penny post cards, make us feel connected to eventful worlds beyond the kitchen with its view of a sky that stops. **H**

180 Now a nude December fig branch grates against the window. The kitchen is empty, the cakes are gone; yesterday we carted the last of them to the post office, where the cost of stamps turned our purse inside out. We're broke. That rather depresses me, but my friend insists on celebrating—with two inches of whiskey left in Haha's bottle. Queenie has a spoonful in a bowl of coffee (she likes her coffee chicory-flavored and strong). The rest we divide between a pair of jelly glasses. We're both quite awed at the prospect of drinking straight whiskey; the taste of it brings screwed-up expressions and sour shudders. But by and by we begin to sing, the two of us singing different songs simultaneously. I don't know the words to mine, just: *Come on along,*
190 *come on along, to the dark-town strutters' ball.* But I can dance: that's what I mean to be, a tap dancer in the movies. My dancing shadow rollicks on the walls; our voices rock the chinaware; we giggle: as if unseen hands were tickling us. Queenie rolls on her back, her paws plow the air, something like a grin stretches her black lips. Inside myself, I feel warm and sparky as those crumbling logs, carefree as the wind in the chimney. My friend waltzes round the stove, the hem of her poor calico skirt pinched between her fingers as though it were a party dress: *Show me the way to go home,* she sings, her tennis shoes squeaking on the floor. *Show me the way to go home.* **I**

Enter: two relatives. Very angry. **Potent** with eyes that scold, tongues that
200 scald. Listen to what they have to say, the words tumbling together into a wrathful tune: "A child of seven! whiskey on his breath! are you out of your mind? feeding a child of seven! must be loony! road to ruin! remember Cousin Kate? Uncle Charlie? Uncle Charlie's brother-in-law? shame! scandal! humiliation! kneel, pray, beg the Lord!"

Queenie sneaks under the stove. My friend gazes at her shoes, her chin quivers, she lifts her skirt and blows her nose and runs to her room. **J**

Long after the town has gone to sleep and the house is silent except for the chimings of clocks and the sputter of fading fires, she is weeping into a pillow already as wet as a widow's handkerchief.

210 "Don't cry," I say, sitting at the bottom of her bed and shivering despite my flannel nightgown that smells of last winter's cough syrup, "don't cry," I beg, teasing her toes, tickling her feet, "you're too old for that."

"It's because," she hiccups, "I *am* too old. Old and funny."

H MAKE INFERENCES

Why do you think Buddy and his friend send their fruitcakes to strangers?

I ANALYZE IMAGERY

In lines 187–198, Capote appeals to four out of the five senses. Identify as many of these sensory details as you can, and note which sense each appeals to.

potent (pōt'nt) *adj.*
powerful

J MAKE INFERENCES

Reread lines 199–206. What impression do you get of the relatives?



Detail of *Another World* (1974), Bob Timberlake. © Bob Timberlake.

“Not funny. Fun. More fun than anybody. Listen. If you don’t stop crying you’ll be so tired tomorrow we can’t go cut a tree.”

She straightens up. Queenie jumps on the bed (where Queenie is not allowed) to lick her cheeks. “I know where we’ll find real pretty trees, Buddy. And holly, too. With berries big as your eyes. It’s way off in the woods. Farther than we’ve ever been. Papa used to bring us Christmas trees from there: 220 carry them on his shoulder. That’s fifty years ago. Well, now: I can’t wait for morning.”

Morning. Frozen rime⁶ lusters the grass; the sun, round as an orange and orange as hot-weather moons, balances on the horizon, burnishes the silvered winter woods. A wild turkey calls. A renegade hog grunts in the undergrowth. Soon, by the edge of knee-deep, rapid-running water, we have to abandon the buggy. Queenie wades the stream first, paddles across barking complaints at the swiftness of the current, the pneumonia-making coldness of it. We follow, holding our shoes and equipment (a hatchet, a burlap sack) above our heads. A mile more: of chastising thorns, burrs and briars that catch at

6. **rime**: a white frost.

230 our clothes; of rusty pine needles brilliant with gaudy fungus and molted feathers. Here, there, a flash, a flutter, an ecstasy of shrillings remind us that not all the birds have flown south. Always, the path unwinds through lemony sun pools and pitch-black vine tunnels. Another creek to cross: a disturbed armada of speckled trout froths the water round us, and frogs the size of plates practice belly flops; beaver workmen are building a dam. On the farther shore, Queenie shakes herself and trembles. My friend shivers, too: not with cold but enthusiasm. One of her hat's ragged roses sheds a petal as she lifts her head and inhales the pine-heavy air. "We're almost there; can you smell it, Buddy?" she says, as though we were approaching an ocean. **K**

240 And, indeed, it is a kind of ocean. Scented acres of holiday trees, prickly-leafed holly. Red berries shiny as Chinese bells: black crows swoop upon them screaming. Having stuffed our burlap sacks with enough greenery and crimson to garland a dozen windows, we set about choosing a tree. "It should be," muses my friend, "twice as tall as a boy. So a boy can't steal the star." The one we pick is twice as tall as me. A brave handsome brute that survives thirty hatchet strokes before it keels with a creaking rending cry. Lugging it like a kill, we commence the long trek out. Every few yards we abandon the struggle, sit down and pant. But we have the strength of triumphant huntsmen; that and the tree's virile, icy perfume revive us, **goad** us on. Many compliments
250 accompany our sunset return along the red clay road to town; but my friend is sly and noncommittal when passers-by praise the treasure perched in our buggy: what a fine tree, and where did it come from? "Yonderways," she murmurs vaguely. Once a car stops, and the rich mill owner's lazy wife leans out and whines: "Giveya two-bits⁷ cash for that ol tree." Ordinarily my friend is afraid of saying no; but on this occasion she promptly shakes her head: "We wouldn't take a dollar." The mill owner's wife persists. "A dollar, my foot! Fifty cents. That's my last offer. Goodness, woman, you can get another one." In answer, my friend gently reflects: "I doubt it. There's never two of anything." **L**

Home: Queenie slumps by the fire and sleeps till tomorrow, snoring loud
260 as a human.

A trunk in the attic contains: a shoebox of ermine tails (off the opera cape of a curious lady who once rented a room in the house), coils of frazzled tinsel gone gold with age, one silver star, a brief rope of dilapidated, undoubtedly dangerous candylike light bulbs. Excellent decorations, as far as they go, which isn't far enough: my friend wants our tree to blaze "like a Baptist window," droop with weighty snows of ornament. But we can't afford the made-in-Japan splendors at the five-and-dime. So we do what we've always done: sit for days at the kitchen table with scissors and crayons and stacks of colored paper. I make sketches and my friend cuts them out: lots of cats, fish too (because
270 they're easy to draw), some apples, some watermelons, a few winged angels devised from saved-up sheets of Hershey-bar tin foil. We use safety pins to attach these creations to the tree; as a final touch, we sprinkle the branches

K DETAILS OF SETTING

Reread lines 222–239. What is the effect of including such vivid details of this natural setting?

goad (gōd) v. to drive or urge

L MAKE INFERENCES

Reread lines 253–258. What do you learn about Buddy's friend from her response to the mill owner's wife?

7. **two-bits**: 25 cents.

with shredded cotton (picked in August for this purpose). My friend, surveying the effect, clasps her hands together. “Now honest, Buddy. Doesn’t it look good enough to eat?” Queenie tries to eat an angel.

After weaving and ribboning holly wreaths for all the front windows, our next project is the fashioning of family gifts. Tie-dye scarves for the ladies, for the men a home-brewed lemon and licorice and aspirin syrup to be taken “at the first Symptoms of a Cold and after Hunting.” But when it comes time for
280 making each other’s gift, my friend and I separate to work secretly. I would like to buy her a pearl-handled knife, a radio, a whole pound of chocolate-covered cherries (we tasted some once, and she always swears: “I could live on them, Buddy, Lord yes I could—and that’s not taking his name in vain”). Instead, I am building her a kite. She would like to give me a bicycle (she’s said so on several million occasions: “If only I could, Buddy. It’s bad enough in life to do without something *you* want; but confound it, what gets my goat is not being able to give somebody something you want *them* to have. Only one of these days I will, Buddy. Locate you a bike. Don’t ask how. Steal it, maybe”).
290 Instead, I’m fairly certain that she is building me a kite—the same as last year and the year before: the year before that we exchanged slingshots. All of which is fine by me. For we are champion kite fliers who study the wind like sailors; my friend, more accomplished than I, can get a kite aloft when there isn’t enough breeze to carry clouds.

Christmas Eve afternoon we scrape together a nickel and go to the butcher’s to buy Queenie’s traditional gift, a good gnawable beef bone. The bone, wrapped in funny paper, is placed high in the tree near the silver star. Queenie knows it’s there. She squats at the foot of the tree staring up in a trance of greed: when bedtime arrives she refuses to budge. Her excitement is equaled by my own. I kick the covers and turn my pillow as though it were a
300 scorching summer’s night. Somewhere a rooster crows: falsely, for the sun is still on the other side of the world.

“Buddy, are you awake?” It is my friend, calling from her room, which is next to mine; and an instant later she is sitting on my bed holding a candle. “Well, I can’t sleep a hoot,” she declares. “My mind’s jumping like a jack rabbit. Buddy, do you think Mrs. Roosevelt will serve our cake at dinner?” We huddle in the bed, and she squeezes my hand I-love-you. “Seems like your hand used to be so much smaller. I guess I hate to see you grow up. When you’re grown up, will we still be friends?” I say always. “But I feel so bad, Buddy. I wanted so bad to give you a bike. I tried to sell my cameo Papa gave
310 me. Buddy”—she hesitates, as though embarrassed—“I made you another kite.” Then I confess that I made her one, too; and we laugh. The candle burns too short to hold. Out it goes, exposing the starlight, the stars spinning at the window like a visible caroling that slowly, slowly daybreak silences. Possibly we doze; but the beginnings of dawn splash us like cold water: we’re up, wide-eyed and wandering while we wait for others to waken. Quite deliberately my friend drops a kettle on the kitchen floor. I tap dance in front of closed doors. One

Language Coach

Oral Fluency Many words in English begin with the letter combinations *kn-* or *gn-*, in which the first letter is silent. Correctly pronounce these words: *knickers, gnash, gnarl, knuckle*. Now say the word in lines 294–295 that follows this pattern.



Christmas Orange (1975), Bob Timberlake. © Bob Timberlake.

by one the household emerges, looking as though they'd like to kill us both; but it's Christmas, so they can't. First, a gorgeous breakfast: just everything you can imagine—from flapjacks and fried squirrel to hominy grits and honey-in-
320 the-comb. Which puts everyone in a good humor except my friend and me. Frankly, we're so impatient to get at the presents we can't eat a mouthful.

Well, I'm disappointed. Who wouldn't be? With socks, a Sunday school shirt, some handkerchiefs, a hand-me-down sweater, and a year's subscription to a religious magazine for children. *The Little Shepherd*. It makes me boil. It really does.

My friend has a better haul. A sack of satsumas,⁸ that's her best present. She is proudest, however, of a white wool shawl knitted by her married sister. But she *says* her favorite gift is the kite I built her. And it *is* very beautiful; though not as beautiful as the one she made me, which is blue and scattered with gold
330 and green Good Conduct stars;⁹ moreover, my name is painted on it, "Buddy."

"Buddy, the wind is blowing." **M**

The wind is blowing, and nothing will do till we've run to a pasture below the house where Queenie has scooted to bury her bone (and where, a winter hence, Queenie will be buried, too). There, plunging through the healthy waist-high grass, we unreel our kites, feel them twitching at the string like sky

M **DETAILS OF SETTING**

What do the gifts received by Buddy and his friend tell you about the economic circumstances of the household?

8. **satsumas** (săt-sōō'məz): fruit similar to tangerines.

9. **Good Conduct stars**: small, shiny, glued paper stars often awarded to children for good behavior or perfect attendance in school.


fish as they swim into the wind. Satisfied, sun-warmed, we sprawl in the grass and peel satsumas and watch our kites **cavort**. Soon I forget the socks and hand-me-down sweater. I'm as happy as if we'd already won the fifty-thousand-dollar Grand Prize in that coffee-naming contest.

340 “My, how foolish I am!” my friend cries, suddenly alert, like a woman remembering too late she has biscuits in the oven. “You know what I’ve always thought?” she asks in a tone of discovery and not smiling at me but a point beyond. “I’ve always thought a body would have to be sick and dying before they saw the Lord. And I imagined that when he came it would be like looking at the Baptist window: pretty as colored glass with the sun pouring through, such a shine you don’t know it’s getting dark. And it’s been a comfort: to think of that shine taking away all the spooky feeling. But I’ll wager it never happens. I’ll wager at the very end a body realizes the Lord has already shown himself. That things as they are”—her hand circles in a gesture that gathers
350 clouds and kites and grass and Queenie pawing earth over her bone—“just what they’ve always seen, was seeing him. As for me, I could leave the world with today in my eyes.”

This is our last Christmas together. **N**

Life separates us. Those who Know Best decide that I belong in a military school. And so follows a miserable succession of bugle-blowing prisons, grim reveille-ridden¹⁰ summer camps. I have a new home too. But it doesn’t count. Home is where my friend is, and there I never go.

And there she remains, puttering around the kitchen. Alone with Queenie. Then alone. (“Buddy dear,” she writes in her wild hard-to-read script,
360 “yesterday Jim Macy’s horse kicked Queenie bad. Be thankful she didn’t feel much. I wrapped her in a Fine Linen sheet and rode her in the buggy down to Simpson’s pasture where she can be with all her Bones . . .”). For a few Novembers she continues to bake her fruitcakes single-handed; not as many, but some: and, of course, she always sends me “the best of the batch.” Also, in every letter she encloses a dime wadded in toilet paper: “See a picture show and write me the story.” But gradually in her letters she tends to confuse me with her other friend, the Buddy who died in the 1880’s; more and more, thirteenth days are not the only days she stays in bed: a morning arrives in November, a leafless birdless coming of winter morning, when she cannot
370 rouse herself to exclaim: “Oh my, it’s fruitcake weather!”

And when that happens, I know it. A message saying so merely confirms a piece of news some secret vein had already received, **severing** from me an irreplaceable part of myself, letting it loose like a kite on a broken string. That is why, walking across a school campus on this particular December morning, I keep searching the sky. As if I expected to see, rather like hearts, a lost pair of kites hurrying toward heaven. 

cavort (kə-vôrt') v. to leap or romp about

COMMON CORE RL 5

N FLASHBACK

As a recollection of the narrator’s childhood, most of this story functions as a **flashback**—in this case, an episode that occurred before the narrator’s present time. How does the narrator’s quick summary of life-changing events leading back to the present (“this particular December morning” in line 374) contribute to the nostalgic tone of the story?

sever (sĕv'ər) v. to cut off

10. **reveille-ridden** (rĕv'ə-lĕ-rĭd'n): dominated by an early-morning signal, as on a bugle, to wake soldiers or campers.



RL 4 Analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone.

Comprehension

1. **Clarify** How is Buddy's friend different from most people her age?
2. **Recall** What makes Christmas with his friend so memorable for Buddy?
3. **Summarize** What happens to the two friends after this particular Christmas?

Text Analysis

4. **Examine Character** Think about your impression of Buddy's friend. What **details** helped create this character portrait?
5. **Draw Conclusions About Characters** Buddy is 7; his friend is over 60. Why are they such good friends? Give examples from the story to support your answer.
6. **Interpret Symbols** A symbol is a person, place, or object that represents something beyond itself. What might the kites at the end of the story represent, or symbolize? Give reasons for your interpretation.
7. **Evaluate Imagery** Look over the examples of imagery that you noted in your chart. Which example seemed the most vivid? What sense or senses did it appeal to? Explain your choice.
8. **Examine Details of Setting** Locate two passages in which the description of setting helps you understand something about the **historical era**, or time period, in which the story takes place. Then explain what the details tell you about the historical era.
9. **Analyze Influence of Setting** Think about the impact of setting on the events and characters in this story. What might change if the story were set in a city instead of the country or in contemporary times instead of the past? Choose one detail of time or place from the story and explain how the story would be different if this detail were altered.
10. **Make Judgments** In your opinion, is this story merely a vivid portrayal of a memory, or does it also convey a **theme**, or message?

Text Criticism

11. **Biographical Context** Since its publication, "A Christmas Memory" has stirred debate among readers and critics. If it is based to a large degree on actual people and events, why is it called fiction? Explain why Capote might have chosen to call this work fiction as opposed to autobiography.

What do you look for in a FRIEND?

How have particular friendships defined these qualities for you?

Vocabulary in Context

▲ VOCABULARY PRACTICE

Identify the word that is not related in meaning to the other words in the set.

1. (a) gear, (b) paraphernalia, (c) materials, (d) notice
2. (a) vigorous, (b) robust, (c) prosaic, (d) forceful
3. (a) start, (b) finish, (c) begin, (d) inaugurate
4. (a) destroy, (b) suffuse, (c) demolish, (d) consume
5. (a) depress, (b) invigorate, (c) energize, (d) exhilarate
6. (a) squander, (b) waste, (c) conserve, (d) misuse
7. (a) retreat, (b) urge, (c) spur, (d) goad
8. (a) potent, (b) mighty, (c) possible, (d) strong
9. (a) cavort, (b) prance, (c) frolic, (d) fight
10. (a) cut, (b) separate, (c) join, (d) sever

WORD LIST

cavort
exhilarate
goad
inaugurate
paraphernalia
potent
prosaic
sever
squander
suffuse

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY IN WRITING

• aspect • circumstance • contribute • distinct • perceive

Buddy and his friend have a wonderful relationship because they each **contribute** to their friendship. Write two short paragraphs. In one paragraph, tell what Buddy contributes to their friendship. In the other paragraph, tell what his friend contributes. Use at least one Academic Vocabulary word in your paragraphs.

VOCABULARY STRATEGY: CONNOTATION AND DENOTATION

A word's **denotation** is its basic dictionary meaning; its **connotations** are the overtones of meaning that it may take on. For example, the vocabulary word *goad* means "to urge," but it has connotations of physically forcing or bullying that *urge* does not have. When you choose words in writing, be sure to consider whether their connotations fit the context.

PRACTICE Choose the word that works best in the context of each sentence.

1. Though the Smiths (spent, squandered) a lot of money, they thought putting their son through college was worth it.
2. It was (brave, foolhardy) of Karen not to study before final exams.
3. Al has a modest, (unassuming, groveling) manner that puts people at ease.
4. Anyone treating patients without a medical degree is a (fraud, pretender).
5. The haircut framed her (thin, emaciated) face quite nicely.

COMMON CORE

L5b Analyze nuances in the meaning of words with similar denotations.

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Language

◆ GRAMMAR AND STYLE: Choose Effective Verb Tense

Review the **Grammar and Style** note on page 344. By choosing to tell his the **present tense**, Capote invites the reader to relive the memory along with the narrator. Here is an example from the story:

*Long after the town **has gone** to sleep and the house **is** silent except for the chimings of clocks and the sputter of fading fires, she **is weeping** into a pillow . . . (lines 207–208)*

Notice how the revisions in blue, changing past to present tense, bring an immediacy to the writing, as though the events were occurring now. Try using a similar technique as you revise your response to the prompt below.

STUDENT MODEL

My friend jammed^s her hat down on her head and recklessly navigated^s the baby buggy across the frosty grass. The pecans we ~~sought~~^{seek are} hiding under rotting leaves and twigs.

READING-WRITING CONNECTION



Increase your understanding of “A Christmas Memory” by responding to this prompt. Then use the **revising tip** to improve your writing.

WRITING PROMPT

Short Constructed Response: Description

Imitation is a good way to learn from a master stylist like Truman Capote. Pick your favorite scene from the story and create a **one- or two-paragraph description** of it, using your own sensory language to create imagery.

REVISING TIP

Review your description. Does it clearly evoke the time and place and include vivid imagery? Does it convey a sense of immediacy? If not, revise your response. Add more sensory language, and remember to experiment with present-tense narration.

COMMON CORE

L3 Apply knowledge of language to make effective choices for meaning or style.

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