Dust and Roots

Trace how a character's view of nature changes under pressure.

11.RL.1.A "Analyze the development of universal themes (e.g., loss of innocence, coming of age, relationship with nature) prevalent in American literature (e.g., short stories, poems, plays, novels, essays, and literary nonfiction) of different eras."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline three details that show how Lena views the land, then number them 1 through 3 to track how her relationship with nature changes.

The Field's Promise

1 In April 1936, Lena Bell stood at the edge of her family's Oklahoma wheat field, measuring the pale stalks with her eyes. Her father had said the land owed them a harvest because they had plowed it every spring. Lena believed him, though the soil now lifted in thin curls around her shoes. She carried a jar of creek water to the garden, pouring each drop beside the beans. When her little brother asked why she saved the plants, she shrugged. "They're ours," she said, as if ownership could make roots hold the ground.

2 By noon, the sky turned copper, and birds vanished from the fence posts. A wind struck the field hard enough to erase Lena's footprints. She ran for the house but saw her father on his knees, pressing a feed sack over the well. Dust poured through the air like smoke. Lena wanted to blame the wind for taking the crop, yet she remembered how the plow had cut the prairie grass year after year. She covered her brother's mouth with her scarf and led him inside. For the first time, the field did not seem to belong to her family.

3 After the storm passed, Lena walked to the garden with a shovel, expecting to find only buried leaves. The bean rows were gone, but one green stem bent above the dust. She did not call it hers. Instead, she fetched buckets from the well and asked her father to leave a strip of grass along the field's edge. "Its roots can catch the soil," she said. He studied the ruined wheat, then handed her the shovel. As they planted grass seeds before dusk, Lena understood that work on the land was not a command. It was a promise to listen, repair, and endure with it.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How does Lena's view of the land change from the first paragraph to the last paragraph? Use one detail from each paragraph.

2. Why is the dust storm a turning point in Lena's relationship with nature?

3. State a universal theme developed in the passage, then explain how Lena's actions develop it.

4. How does the contrast between a "command" and a "promise" clarify the passage's theme?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a 70 to 90 word analytical paragraph comparing the passage's relationship-with-nature theme with one American literary work from a different era. State how both works develop the theme through character, speaker, conflict, or imagery, and include one specific detail from each work.

ANSWER KEY

Dust and Roots

GRADE 11 · 11.RL.1.A

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline three details that show how Lena views the land, then number them 1 through 3 to track how her relationship with nature changes. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How does Lena's view of the land change from the first paragraph to the last paragraph? Use one detail from each paragraph.	**At first, Lena treats the land as family property, saying the beans are "ours." By the end, she sees the land as something people must care for, asking to plant grass and calling work on the land a promise.**
2	Why is the dust storm a turning point in Lena's relationship with nature?	**The storm destroys the crop, erases Lena's footprints, and shows that the family cannot control the land. It also makes Lena connect the damage to years of plowing prairie grass.**
3	State a universal theme developed in the passage, then explain how Lena's actions develop it.	**A universal theme is that people must replace a desire to control nature with responsibility for it. Lena moves from claiming the plants as hers to protecting the soil by planting grass.**
4	How does the contrast between a "command" and a "promise" clarify the passage's theme?	**A command suggests that people control the land. A promise suggests mutual responsibility, because Lena must listen to the land, repair damage, and endure its hardships.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Lena's story and John Muir's 1897 essay "The American Forests" both develop a relationship with nature based on responsibility rather than ownership. At first, Lena says the beans are "ours," but after the dust storm she proposes grass whose roots can hold soil. Muir warns that people have stripped forests and calls for protection of trees. His argument and Lena's change both show that human survival depends on caring for damaged land.

Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text. Accept equivalent theme statements that explain a shift from ownership or control to stewardship, humility, or repair. For the open response, accept any accurate American literary work from a different era if the comparison uses specific evidence from both texts.