“American History” Short Story Questions and Answers

1. What did you learn about the **protagonist** Elena? Include all important details. Be thorough.

   Elena is a Puerto Rican girl living in the tenement known as El Building. At her school, Public School Number 13, she was picked on and teased a lot by her classmates, making Elena feel very insecure about herself. “I [Elena] hated my skinny flat-chested body, and I [Elena] envied the black girls who could jump rope so fast that their legs became a blur” (Cofer 94). Not only was she insecure about her body, but she also did not like wearing glasses, being sensitive to the cold, being uncoordinated, and not being athletic. English was not her native language, which prevented her from taking advanced classes at school, even though she was a straight-A student. She also very much liked the boy next door, Eugene, whom she would watch from her window into his kitchen and yard. She also had a very watchful mother. After seeing Elena looking out of her bedroom window into Eugene’s kitchen, Elena’s mother commented on how Elena was acting “like a girl stupidly infatuated,” and Elena went on to explain that recently “mother had been more vigilant than ever. She acted as if I was going to go crazy or explode or something if she didn’t watch me and nag me all the time about being a senorita now” (Cofer 96-97). Elena wishes to go to college and become a teacher. She also likes to read, and is very romantic.

2. What do you know about Eugene that is important to our understanding of the story?

   Eugene was tall, blond, and from Georgia, which made him nearly opposite to Elena and the others living in El Building. Unlike Elena, Eugene lived in a house. He was “in honors classes for all his subjects; classes that were not open to me [Elena] because English was not my first language, though I was a straight A student” (Cofer 96). He belonged to a family that believed that they would only be in this neighborhood temporarily. Eugene’s parents are professionally employed. After starting to read *Gone With the Wind* at her house, Elena was curious about if life in Georgia was really how it was described in the book. She thought about how Eugene was from Georgia: “His father worked for a company that had transferred him to Paterson...” (Cofer 98). Later, when Elena was standing outside of Eugene’s house talking to Eugene’s mother, Elena noticed “that she [Eugene’s mother] wore a white nurse’s uniform with ‘St. Joseph’s Hospital’ on the name tag” (Cofer 101). The fact that Eugene’s family has higher employment status than Elena’s becomes significant to the climax of the story as Eugene’s mother acts superior to Elena.

3. What details about the **setting** and **cultural environment** add to our understanding of Elena’s feelings?

   a) First, determine the time, place, and cultural environment, and include all relevant details from the text. Quote details from the text and cite page numbers.
b) Second, explain how the details of setting and cultural environment add to our understanding of Elena’s feelings.

The story takes place during the time surrounding the assassination of President Kennedy on Friday, November 22, 1963. The setting is Paterson, NJ, an area where many minority people lived: “then the immigrants had come in droves, and the monstrosities had been raised for them—the Italians, the Irish, the Jews, and now us, the Puerto Ricans, and the blacks” (Cofer 101). The cultural environment was one where people of different cultures tended to segregate, even though they were physically located close together. The setting in which Elena lives makes her feel like less of a person and very insecure about herself. For example, Eugene’s mother turned Elena away simply because she was Puerto Rican. “It’s nothing personal. You understand? We won’t be in this place much longer, no need for him to get close to people…” (Cofer 101). If Elena were to have grown up in a setting that was more accepting, she would be able to have more confidence instead of being constantly downtrodden. Also, upon hearing the news of the President’s death, the school’s disciplinarian, Mr. DePalma, told the students in a very condescending manner that President Kennedy had died: “The president is dead, you idiots. I should have known that wouldn’t mean anything to a bunch of losers like you kids. Go home.’ He was shrieking now (Cofer 99). Upon being talked to in that way, it is not surprising that the students’ initial reaction was being happy that they could leave school early. Also, the way that the El Building where Elena lives casts a shadow over Eugene’s house makes Elena feel like she is worth less. After Eugene moved into his house, Elena noticed from her room that “El Building blocked most of the sun and that the only spot that got a little sunlight during the day was the tiny square of earth the old woman had planted with flowers” (Cofer 96). Flowers are very beautiful, and the growth of them in the only place not impacted by Elena and others in Elena’s position makes Elena feel like her and other minority people are like shadows being cast over the flowering upper class.

4. A **social construct** is a social category created and developed by society; a perception of an individual, group or idea that is constructed through cultural or social practice. How do Elena’s race, gender and socioeconomic come into play in this story?

As a poor Puerto Rican girl, Elena is discriminated against in several ways. For instance, she lives in “El Building, which looked particularly ugly, like a gray prison with its many dirty windows and rusty fire escapes” (Cofer 101) because of her family’s low income. She is discriminated against at school because of her race, where honors classes “were not open to me [Elena] because English was not my first language, though I was a straight A student” (Cofer 96). Also, gender plays a role in the story. Girls and boys were often separated. For example, in gym class, though it was “‘free’ exercise time... that means that the girls should jump rope and the boys toss basketballs through a hoop at the far end of the yard” (Cofer 93). It would most likely prove very difficult for Elena to be able to join the boys in playing basketball,
despite how Elena was “miserable... taking a lot of abuse from the black girls for not turning the rope hard and fast enough for them” (Cofer 94).

5. How is the archetype of weather used throughout this story? In other words, what does the weather symbolize each time it’s mentioned? Look at the different times the weather is important. For this reason, indicate the pages where you see weather in citations.

Weather was symbolically used throughout this story. Early in the story, the reader learns that “it was a cold gray day in Paterson. The kind that warns of early snow” (Cofer 94). This was to show how Elena was in a cold, gray mood and the circumstances foreshadowed that her situation would become even colder. This turned out to be the case, with the girls being mean to her, the assassination of the President, and her rejection from Eugene’s mother. The next time weather was used was to describe the suburbs, which Elena compared to paradise: “where people mowed grass on Sundays in the summer and where children made snowmen in the winter from pure white snow, not like the gray slush of Paterson, which seemed to fall from the sky in that hue” (Cofer 97). Gray snow typically represents filth and suffocation, whereas pure white snow is clean, inviting, and safe. Weather is used again as Mr. DePalma was telling the students the bad news of President Kennedy’s death: “came out into the cold... on a November day that was turning bitter cold” (Cofer 98). Freezing cold is very unpleasant weather to be in; likewise, the news of the President’s death is very unpleasant. Weather is used for a final time, as Elena is lying awake in bed: “Looking up at the light I could see the white snow falling like a lace veil over its face. I did not look down to see it turning gray as it touched the ground below” (Cofer 102). This shows how the situation was going from light to grayer and grayer; her situation with Eugene started light and happy with an invitation, but became more negative when his mother rejected her.

6. The protagonist’s mother, Mama, tries to give Elena a warning on page 100. What does Mama mean when she says to Elena, “you are headed for humiliation and pain?” What is the external conflict at the end of the story (see page 101)? Explain in detail.

Mama’s warning means that she is aware of the magnitude of the possibility of Elena getting turned away at the door, which would certainly be cause for “humiliation and pain” (Cofer 100). Moreover, Mama is aware of the racism that she has experienced throughout her life, and worries that Elena may soon experience it. As Elena’s mother anticipated, Elena was not given a warm welcome at the door: “What do you want?” Her voice was tiny and sweet-sounding, like a little girl’s, but her tone was not friendly... ‘You live there?’ She pointed up to El Building, which looked particularly ugly...” (Cofer 101). The external conflict was that because of Elena’s race, she was not able to be welcome at her friend’s house, which she had been desperately wanting for a very long time; Eugene’s mother turned Elena away, immediately judging her based on her appearance.
7. What is the narrator's **epiphany** at the end of the story? Read the last paragraph very carefully, focusing on the last two lines. To answer this question, you have to make an **inference** (draw a conclusion from known facts or statements). **Hint:** Re-read the excerpt from "It’s More Than Just Rain or Snow."

At the end of the story, Elena’s epiphany is that she realizes things are not always how they seem based on appearances, and that how a person looks does not tell you about how that person is inside. Elena appears to be a poor, unintelligent foreign girl, but she is a really nice and smart person inside. Eugene’s house and family appear to be all perfect and ideal, but then his mother turns out to be racist. At the end of this story: “[Elena] could see the white snow falling like a lace veil over its face. I [Elena] did not look down to see it turning gray as it touched the ground below” (Cofer 102). The snow appeared to be all hopeful and pure, but really, it was going to turn filthy and dark very soon. This is symbolic of the fact that Elena wished she could continue to believe that there was only goodness around her. By refusing to watch the snow get dirty as it touches the ground, she is realizing that there is sadness, bitterness, and hate in her world that she does not want to have to acknowledge.

8. How is the change that Elena is undergoing in this story similar to the one Esperanza is starting to undergo in Section III?

Elena and Esperanza are undergoing similar changes. In particular, they are becoming more mature, both physically and emotionally. Physically, they are both transitioning from being a girl to being young women. For example, we are told that Elena is a ninth grader at the time of the Kennedy assassination and Esperanza and her new friends, Rachel and Lucy, discuss their recent development of having hips and how to use them, suggesting, too, that they are physically maturing. Emotionally, both are starting to notice boys. Elena’s mother tells her that she is “Enamorada...that is, like a girl stupidly infatuated” (Cofer 96) and Esperanza notices all the men watching her when she, Rachel, and Lucy are walking down the street wearing high heels: “Down to the corner where the men can’t take their eyes off us. We must be Christmas” (Cisneros 40) and is asked to dance by her boy cousin at a baptism, and then notices him watching her dance with her uncle: “All night the boy who is a man watches me dance. He watched me dance” (Cisneros 48).

9. Elena has certain hopes and expectations. What are they, and what is her reality? Esperanza also seems to experience a discrepancy between her expectations and her reality. What is this discrepancy?

Elena wanted more than anything was to “enter that house I [Elena] had watched for so many years. I wanted to see the other rooms where the old people had lived and where the boy I liked spent his time. Most of all, I wanted to sit at the kitchen table with Eugene.... Though I wanted to feel the right thing about President Kennedy’s death, I could not fight the feeling of elation that stirred in my chest. Today was the day I was to visit Eugene in his house” (Cofer 99). Moreover, Elena
wanted to live “where people mowed grass on Sundays in the summer and where children made snowmen in the winter from pure white snow” (Cofer 97) and wanted to go “go to college and become a teacher” (Cofer 97). These hopes and expectations are higher that what was really possible given who Elena was. Because of her race, these were likely an impossibility, which she discovered upon trying the most simple of which, trying to go into Eugene’s house after being invited. Esperanza too had a discrepancy between her expectations and her reality, one example of which being in the vignette titled “The Rice Sandwich,” when Esperanza has very inflated expectations of what she thinks eating her lunch at school would be like. But upon doing so, learns that it is “nothing special.” Similar to Elena, Esperanza has larger hopes than what she is most likely going to experience. In the vignette titled “My Name,” Esperanza discusses that she wished that she preferred her name in Spanish rather than in English because it felt less different, despite the English definition being better than the Spanish one. This shows that Esperanza wished that she were somewhere where she could fit in instead of always being different. However, in order to stay in America and have a better life, she would always be a minority girl.