Name _____ Date _____

Symbolism: The Unfinished Fence

Directions: Read the story carefully, watching how the meaning of the fence grows from one part of the story to the next. Then answer each question, checking every choice against the words of the story.

The Unfinished Fence

My father started the fence the spring before he moved out. He sank eleven cedar posts along the back of our yard, checking every hole with a yardstick and a level, and he promised it would be finished by the Fourth of July. "A fence tells the world where your home begins," he said, wiping his hands on his jeans. I was eleven and believed everything he said about the world.

He nailed boards across the first eight posts, and then he stopped. By the Fourth of July he was living in an apartment across town, and the last three posts stood bare at the end of the row, gray and splintering, like a sentence he had started and never finished.

For two years, the fence stayed exactly as he had left it. My mother talked about taking the posts out, but every time she brought it up, I said I would finish the fence myself someday, and she let it drop. I think we both knew I was not really talking about the fence.

My little brother, Ben, never saw it the way I did. To him, the gap at the end was simply the fastest way to the Novaks' yard, where there were three boys his age and a trampoline. He wore a path through the grass between the last two posts, and by the second summer the Novaks' dog was using it too, and so were the Novak boys, who came through without knocking, the way you do at a house you trust.

The third spring, my mother planted sunflowers along the bare posts. "They need something to lean on," she said, which was the closest she ever came to talking about him. By August they were taller than the boards my father had nailed up, their heavy yellow faces turned toward the open gap.

On my fourteenth birthday, my father called and asked whether I still wanted his old toolbox. I said yes. When it arrived, I took out his hammer, walked to the end of the fence, and stood there for a long time, looking at the three bare posts, the sunflowers and the path that Ben had worn into the grass.

Then I went to the hardware store and bought hinges.

The gate I built was crooked, it squeaked, and it took me most of a weekend. But it swung both ways, and I never put a latch on it.

1. In the opening paragraph of "The Unfinished Fence," the father explains, "A fence tells the world where your home begins," while wiping his hands on his jeans. What does the fence represent to him at this point in the story?

A. A sign that he is getting ready to move away

B. A way to keep the children from leaving the yard

C. A project he plans to sell for extra money

D. A clear boundary marking the place he calls home

2. Right after the father's words, the narrator adds, "I was eleven and believed everything he said about the world." How does this sentence affect the father's words about the fence?

A. It hints that the older narrator no longer trusts those words, casting doubt on the promise the fence stood for.

B. It shows that the narrator still trusts the father completely.

C. It proves that the father was lying about the fence.

D. It explains why the fence was finished early.

3. In the second paragraph, the last three posts stand bare, "like a sentence he had started and never finished." What does this simile add to the fence's meaning?

A. It suggests that the fence was built badly.

B. It shows that the father plans to come back and finish soon.

C. It shows that the father was a writer.

D. It ties the unfinished fence to something the father left incomplete when he moved out.

4. When the narrator keeps promising to finish the fence "someday," the narrator adds, "I think we both knew I was not really talking about the fence." What has the fence come to stand for in the narrator's mind?

A. A part of the yard that the narrator wants to remove

B. A boring chore that the narrator keeps putting off

C. A reason for the narrator to argue with the mother

D. Something the father left behind that the narrator still hopes to make whole

5. Which two details show the gap in the fence turning into a way through, rather than just an empty space? Select two.

☐ A. "the last three posts stood bare at the end of the row, gray and splintering"

☐ B. "My mother talked about taking the posts out"

☐ C. "He nailed boards across the first eight posts"

☐ D. "He wore a path through the grass between the last two posts"

☐ E. "who came through without knocking, the way you do at a house you trust"

6. The narrator's mother plants sunflowers along the bare posts and says, "They need something to lean on," which the narrator calls "the closest she ever came to talking about him." Why does the narrator hear the remark this way?

A. Though she is talking about the plants, her words also seem to point toward the father and his absence.

B. She is explaining exactly how sunflowers should be grown.

C. She is complaining that the father never helped in the garden.

D. She is reminding the narrator to finish the fence.

7. By August, the sunflowers are "taller than the boards my father had nailed up, their heavy yellow faces turned toward the open gap." What does this image suggest about the gap?

A. It has become a place of brightness and new growth, not only a reminder of something missing.

B. It proves that the father will soon return.

C. It frightens the family more than ever.

D. It is about to be boarded up for good.

8. On the narrator's fourteenth birthday, the father calls to ask whether the narrator still wants "his old toolbox." What does this gift add to the story of the fence?

A. It shows that the father plans to come back and finish the fence himself.

B. It puts the means of finishing the fence in the narrator's hands, so what happens next is the narrator's choice.

C. It reveals that the narrator wants to become a carpenter.

D. It shows that the father has forgotten the fence entirely.

9. After standing at the end of the fence for a long time, the narrator goes to the hardware store and buys hinges. What does the word "hinges" signal about the narrator's decision?

A. The narrator will finish the fence exactly as the father planned.

B. The narrator plans to take the whole fence down.

C. The narrator wants to repair the father's toolbox.

D. The narrator will build a gate in the gap instead of closing it with boards.

10. The father once said, "A fence tells the world where your home begins," and the story ends with the narrator's crooked gate, which "swung both ways" and has no latch. How does this final image change the meaning of the fence?

A. It shows that the narrator has given up on the fence.

B. It suggests that home can begin with an open way in, not only with a closed boundary.

C. It shows that the fence now keeps the neighbors out.

D. It proves that the father will move back home.