

Teacher Guide

“The Burglar’s Christmas”

by Elizabeth L. Seymour aka Willa Cather

Suggested Lesson Procedure: ~3 Days

1) Before Reading Worksheet (~10 minutes): Have students complete the before reading activity where they write a brief short story using words given to them. These words are taken from the story and hint at the main elements. This strategy builds anticipation, activates prior knowledge, and encourages students to make connections before engaging with the text. Have a few students share their stories with the class.

2) Teach Vocabulary Terms (~15 minutes): Use the provided PowerPoint to introduce vocabulary terms from “The Burglar’s Christmas” as well as background information on the author. As you present each term, have students copy the definitions into their vocabulary chart graphic organizers.

3) Read the Short Story and Answer During Reading Questions (~40 minutes)

Read “The Burglar’s Christmas” as a class, pausing periodically to discuss key passages and clarify understanding. As you read, students should answer the accompanying reading questions. Allocate time for brief discussions to ensure comprehension.

4) After-Reading Questions (~15 minutes):

Pair students to complete the after-reading questions. Encourage collaboration and discussion to deepen their understanding of the story’s themes and events.

5) Figurative Language Chart (~30 Minutes)

Assign students to groups of 2-3 to work on the figurative language chart. Acknowledge that this task may be challenging, especially for lower secondary students, and encourage them to try their best to identify and explain each type of figurative language. After 15-20 minutes, review the chart together as a class, discussing each example and its meaning to reinforce understanding.

6) Read “The Prodigal Son” (~10 minutes):

As a class, read the parable of “The Prodigal Son”.

7) Venn Diagram Comparison (~10 minutes)

Students will complete a Venn diagram comparing the themes, characters, and events in “The Burglar’s Christmas” and “The Prodigal Son”. Allow students to work individually or in pairs.

8) Comparison Discussion Questions (~20 minutes)

Group students in pairs or small groups to discuss and answer the after reading discussion questions.

Conclude the lesson by reviewing the discussion questions as a whole class, allowing students to share their insights and consolidate their understanding.

Note to Teachers:

The full texts included in this resource have been edited. I have removed the racial slur in “The Burglar’s Christmas” and the term “prostitutes” in “The Prodigal Son.”

Name:

Date:

Before Reading

Directions: Using all of the words in the box, write a short story that connects all of them. Be creative!
Try to write a narrative that makes sense. You have five minutes. Be ready to share!

PREVIEW

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Chicago

crowd

thief

hungry

Santa Claus

shame

family

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PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

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Name:

Date:

“The Burglar’s Christmas” Short Story by Willa Cather

Vocabulary

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Word	Part of Speech	Definition	Synonyms
despondently	adverb		
grit	noun		
aristocratic	adjective		
reckoning	noun		
incentive	noun		
introspection	noun		
agility	noun		

grapple	verb		
jaded	adjective		
futile	adjective		
superfluous	adjective		
entreaty	noun		
reproach	noun		
vexed	adjective		

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Name:

"The Burglar's Christmas" by Elizabeth L. Seymour

During Reading Questions

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1) What is Crawford's emotional and physical state at the beginning of the story?

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2) In what ways does the cold and harsh weather mirror Crawford's internal state?

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3) What details suggest that Crawford's loneliness extends beyond physical isolation?

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4) How do the references to William's past choices and failures add depth to the story and his character?

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5) What drives William to finally decide to break into a house?

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6) What does William notice about the house he decides to burglarize?

PREVIEW

7) Why does William take off his muddy hat as he walks up the stairs?

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8) What shocking discovery does William make once inside the house?

PREVIEW

9) What does William's mother's reaction reveal about her character and values?

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10) Why does William feel unworthy of his mother's forgiveness?

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After Reading Questions

11) How does the discovery that the house belongs to William's parents serve as a turning point in the story?

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13) How does the Christmas setting influence the story's message?

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14) What examples of foreshadowing are in this story?

15) How does the internal conflict within William contribute to the story's emotional impact?

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16) What universal themes or messages does the story convey about the power of love and forgiveness?

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17) How is it ironic that William chooses to rob his own parents' house?

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18) Would the story have been as effective if told from William's first-person perspective? Why or why not?

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19) Why is the title "The Burglar's Christmas" significant?

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20) Is the father in the story just as forgiving as the mother? Why or why not? How does this compare the dynamic of relationships in today's world?

Name:

Date:

Figurative Language Analysis

Complete the chart below by reading each line from the story. Identify the type of figurative language used in the underlined section and explain its meaning in your own words. Refer to the story for context. The first example has been completed for you.

Line from Story	Figurative Language	Explanation
1. "Got anything left you can <u>hoc</u> ?"	slang	This is slang for pawning an item, meaning to exchange something for money.
2. "I guess we are <u>at our rope's end</u> , sure enough."		
3. "I think I had a <u>row</u> in Longtin's place once. I'd better not show myself there again."		
4. "It is a tragic hour, that hour when we are finally driven to reckon with ourselves, when every avenue of mental distraction has been cut off and our own life and all its irreversible failures closes about us like the walls of that old torture chamber of the <u>Inquisition</u> ."		
5. "The unyielding conviction was upon him that he had failed in everything, had outlived everything. It had been near him for a long time, <u>that Pale Spectre</u> . He had caught its shadow at the bottom of his glass many a time, at the head of his bed when he was sleepless at night, in the twilight shadows when some great sunset broke upon him."		
6. "But now <u>it settled slowly over him, like night</u> , the endless Northern nights that bid the sun a long farewell."		
7. "It rose up before him <u>like granite</u> ."		

8. "His days seemed numbered and done, sealed over like the little coral cells at the bottom of the sea."

PREVIEW

9. "And since then there were other birthday suppers that he could not remember so clearly: the memory of them was heavy and flat, like cigarette smoke that has been shut in a room all night, like champagne that has been a day opened, a song that has been too often sung, an acute sensation that has been overstrained."

10. "It would be interesting to add another study to his gallery of futile attempts, and then label them all: "the failure as a journalist," "the failure as a lecturer," "the failure as a businessman," "the failure as a thief," and so on, like the titles under the pictures of the Dance of Death. It was time that Childe Roland came to the dark tower."

11. "Still burning with impatience against himself he entered quickly."

12. "That soft voice, the warmth and fragrance of her person stole through his chill, empty veins like a gentle stimulant."

13. "I know your every possibility and limitation, as a composer knows his instrument."

14. "He wondered dimly if the Author of this sad little riddle of ours were not able to solve it after all, and if the Potter would not finally mete out his all comprehensive justice, such as none but he could have, to his Things of Clay, which are made in his own patterns, weak or strong, for his own ends."

Name:

Date:

**After Reading
Discussion Questions**

1) Which story's portrayal of family dynamics and forgiveness feels more relatable or realistic to you? Why?

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2) In both stories, the protagonists take responsibility for their actions. Why is taking responsibility so important?

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4) How would you respond if you were the older brother in "The Prodigal Son"?

5) How do societal pressures or personal pride sometimes stop people from seeking forgiveness, as seen in "The Burglar's Christmas"?

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6) Do you think families should always be forgiving of one another? Are there limits to forgiveness in real life?

7) Forgiving others can be difficult, but what about forgiving yourself? How can people overcome self-blame to find redemption?

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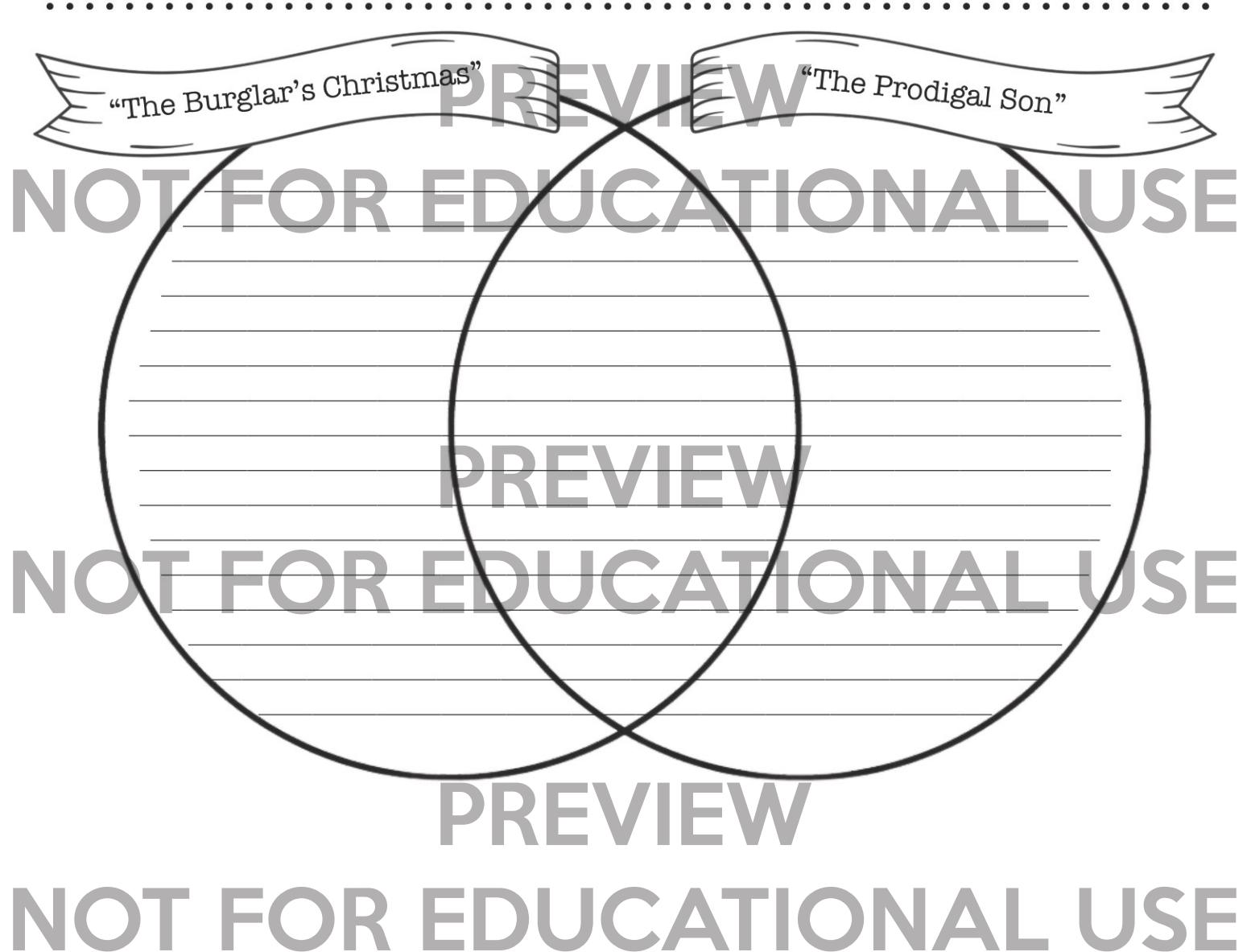
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Name:

Class:

VENN DIAGRAM



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A BURGLAR'S CHRISTMAS
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Willa Cather

- An American writer known for her novels of life on the Great Plains, including *O Pioneers!*, *The Song of the Lark*, and *My Ántonia*.
- In 1923, she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for *One of Ours*, a novel set during World War I.
- “The Burglar’s Christmas” is a short story by Cather which was published in “The Home Monthly” in December 1896.
- Cather wrote this story under the pseudonym Elizabeth L. Seymour, which is her cousin’s name.
- Willa Cather used a pseudonym in her career occasionally because she was a very private person.
- The story “The Burglar’s Christmas” is a retelling of the parable “The Prodigal Son” (Luke 15:11-3).



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despondently

Part of Speech: adverb

Definition: in a manner that shows hopelessness or loss of confidence

Synonyms: dejectedly, disheartenedly

Example Sentence: Lucy looked at the empty room despondently, feeling the weight of her failure pressing down on her.



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grit

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Part of Speech: noun

Definition: determination or courage in the face of hardship

Synonyms: bravery, resolve

Example Sentence: Tina's grit helped her win the race despite being the youngest and least experienced runner.



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aristocratic PREVIEW

Part of Speech: adjective

Definition: describes someone or something having qualities of a noble or privileged class

Synonyms: classy, sophisticated

Example Sentence: The aristocratic family lived in a grand mansion and attended the Queen of England's Christmas party every year.



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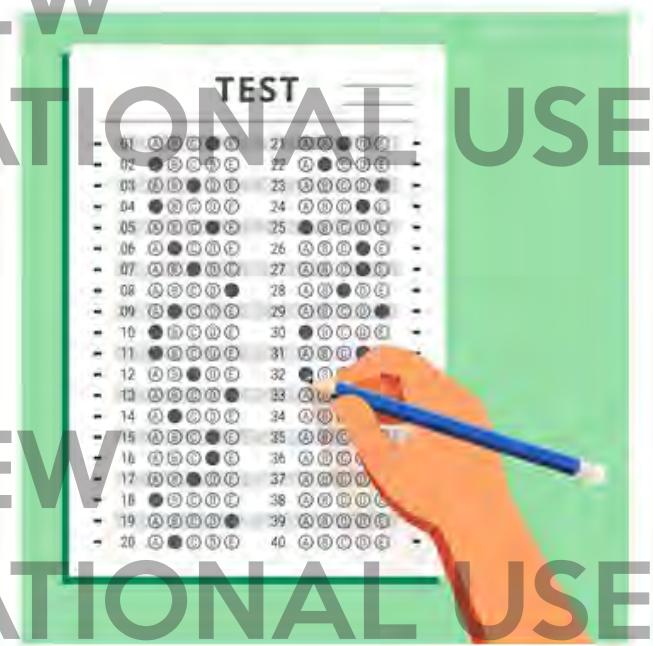
reckoning

Part of Speech: noun

Definition: the time or process when one must face and accept the consequences

Synonyms: judgment, fate

Example Sentence: The day of reckoning finally came, when Jacob had to take his final exam despite refusing to study all semester.



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incentive

Part of Speech: noun

Definition: a thing that motivates or encourages someone to do something

Synonyms: motivation, encouragement

Example Sentence: Students who demonstrated good behavior during the assembly were given the incentive of an additional thirty minutes of recess.



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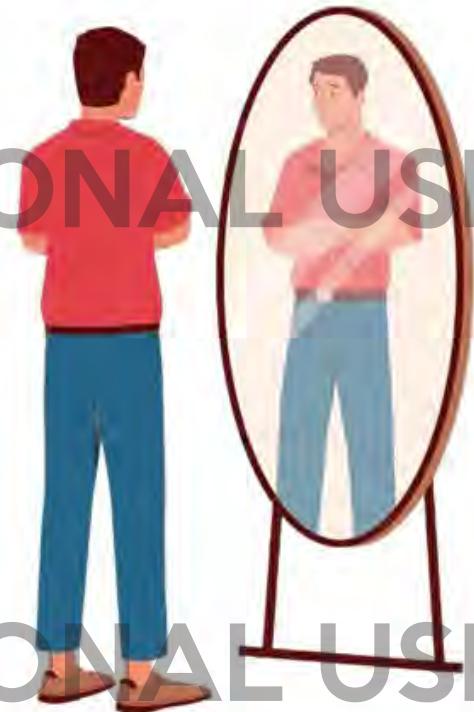
introspection

Part of Speech: noun

Definition: the observation of one's own mental and emotional state

Synonyms: self-reflection, self-examination

Example Sentence: After the argument with his father, Landon stood in quiet introspection, pondering his own faults.



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agility

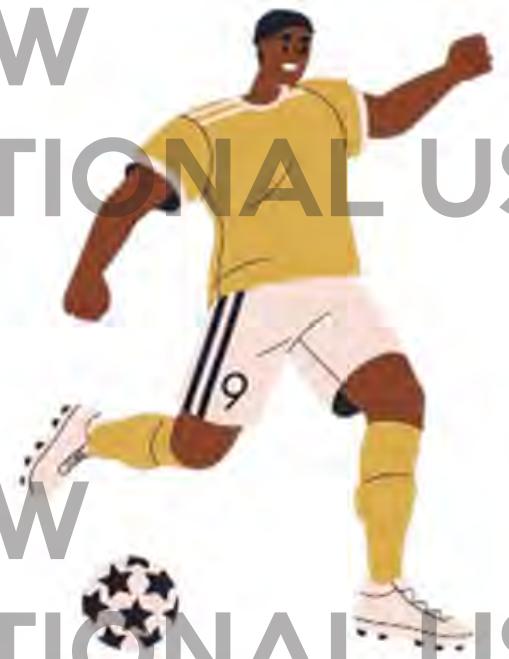
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Definition: the ability to move quickly and easily

Synonyms: nimbleness, quickness

Example Sentence: Owen's agility on the soccer field was unmatched, allowing him to dodge defenders with ease.



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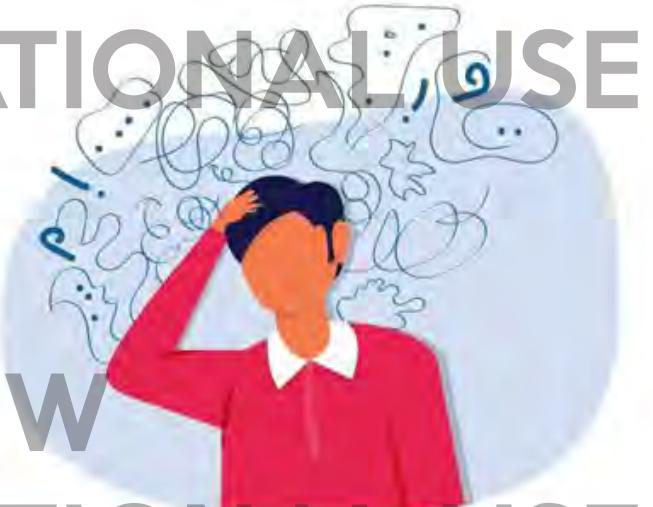
grapple PREVIEW

Part of Speech: verb

Definition: to wrestle with someone or something; also, to come to terms with a difficult challenge

Synonyms: struggle, tackle

Example Sentence: Jack had to grapple with the decision of leaving his job for a new opportunity that offered less pay but greater freedom to work from home.



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jaded

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Part of Speech: adjective

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Definition: describes someone who is tired or lacking enthusiasm, typically after having had too much of something

Synonyms: weary, disillusioned

Example Sentence: After years of auditions and rejection, Mia felt jaded and no longer believed that a successful acting career was within reach.



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futile

PREVIEW

Part of Speech: adjective

Definition: describes incapable of producing any useful result

Synonyms: useless, pointless

Example Sentence: The attempt to fix the broken furniture was futile, as it was beyond repair.



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superfluous

Part of Speech: adjective

Definition: describes unnecessary, especially through being more than enough

Synonyms: excessive, redundant

Example Sentence: Olivia decided to remove the superfluous paragraphs from her speech to make it more concise and impactful.



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entreaty

Part of Speech: noun

Definition: an earnest or humble request

Synonyms: plea, appeal

Example Sentence: Lucas's entreaty for a second chance was met with uncertainty.



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reproach

Part of Speech: noun

Definition: the expression of disapproval or disappointment

Synonyms: criticism, dissatisfaction

Example Sentence: Judy's eyes met Bobby's with reproach when she realized he had lied to her about how much money he lost gambling.



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vexed PREVIEW

Part of Speech: adjective
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Definition: describes someone who is annoyed, frustrated, or worried

Synonyms: irritated, troubled

Example Sentence: Leah was vexed by the constant noise coming from the construction site next door.

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