As you read lines 1–33, begin to collect and cite text evidence.

• Underline descriptive words and phrases in lines 1–7.
• In the margin, describe the mood of the first paragraph.
• Underline some of the descriptive words in lines 29–33.
• In the margin, describe your impression of the school.

Inside the car it was quiet, the noise of the engine even and subdued, the air just the right temperature, the windows tight-fitting. The boy sat on the back seat, a box of chocolates, unopened, beside him, and a comic, folded. The trim Sussex landscape flowed past the windows: cows, white-fenced fields, highly priced period houses. The sunlight was glassy, remote as a colored photograph. The backs of the two heads in front of him swayed with the motion of the car.

His mother half-turned to speak to him. “Nearly there now, darling.”

The father glanced downwards at his wife’s wrist. “Are we all right for time?”

“Just right. Nearly twelve.”

“I could do with a drink. Hope they lay something on.”

“I’m sure they will. The Wilcoxes say they’re awfully nice people. Not really the schoolmaster-type at all, Sally says.”

Background Penelope Lively was born in Cairo, Egypt, in 1933. At the age of twelve she moved to England, where she attended The Downs, a boarding school. “I was excruciatingly unhappy for four years,” Lively says of her boarding school experience. She also notes, “The school was rigorously devoted to the improvement of its girls’ lacrosse and netball.” Boarding schools are fairly common in England. It is sometimes argued that expensive and exclusive boarding schools perpetuate an “old boy network” of social entitlement in English society.
The man said, “He’s an Oxford chap.”
“Is he? You didn’t say.”
“Mmn.”
“Of course, the fees are that much higher than the Seaford place.”
“Fifty quid\(^3\) or so. We’ll have to see.”

The car turned right, between white gates and high, dark, tight-clipped hedges. The whisper of the road under the tires changed to the crunch of gravel. The child, staring sideways, read black lettering on a white board:

“St. Edward’s Preparatory School. Please Drive Slowly.” He shifted on the seat, and the leather sucked at the bare skin under his knees, stinging.

The mother said, “It’s a lovely place. Those must be the playing fields. Look, darling, there are some of the boys.” She clicked open her handbag, and the sun caught her mirror and flashed in the child’s eye; the comb went through her hair and he saw the grooves it left, neat as distant ploughing.

“Come on, then, Charles, out you get.”

The building was red brick, early nineteenth century, spreading out long arms in which windows glittered blackly. Flowers, trapped in neat beds, were alternate red and white. They went up the steps, the man, the woman, and the child two paces behind.

The woman, the mother, smoothing down a skirt that would be ridged from sitting, thought: I like the way they’ve got the maid all done up properly. The little white apron and all that. She’s foreign, I suppose. Au pair.\(^4\) Very nice. If he comes here, there’ll be Speech Days and that kind of thing. Sally Wilcox says it’s quite dressy—she got that cream linen coat for coming down here. You can see why it costs a bomb. Great big grounds and only an hour and a half from London.

\(^3\) quid: slang for pounds, British monetary unit.
\(^4\) au pair: foreign person who does domestic work for room and board and for an opportunity to learn the language of her employers.

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2. **REREAD** Reread lines 19–33. Do you think Charles is likely to agree with his mother that, “It’s a lovely place”? Support your inference with explicit textual evidence.

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3. **READ** As you read lines 34–111, continue to cite textual evidence.

- Circle the parents’ unspoken thoughts.
- In the margin, make inferences based on the parents’ thoughts.
They went into a room looking out into a terrace. Beyond, dappled lawns, gently shifting trees, black and white cows grazing behind iron railings. Books, leather chairs, a table with magazines—*Country Life, The Field, The Economist*. “Please, if you would wait here. The Headmaster won’t be long.”

Alone, they sat, inspected. “I like the atmosphere, don’t you, John?”

“Very pleasant, yes.” Four hundred a term, near enough. You can tell it’s a cut above the Seaford place, though, or the one at St. Albans. Bob Wilcox says quite a few City people send their boys here. One or two of the merchant bankers, those kind of people. It’s the sort of contact that would do no harm at all. You meet someone, get talking at a cricket match or what have you . . . Not at all a bad thing.

“All right, Charles? You didn’t get sick in the car, did you?”

The child had black hair, slicked down smooth to his head. His ears, too large, jutted out, transparent in the light from the window, laced with tiny, delicate veins. His clothes had the shine and crease of newness. He looked at the books, the dark brown pictures, his parents, said nothing.

“Come here, let me tidy your hair.”

The door opened. The child hesitated, stood up, sat, then rose again with his father.

“Mr. and Mrs. Manders? How very nice to meet you—I’m Margaret Spokes, and will you please forgive my husband who is tied up with some wretch who broke the cricket pavilion window and will be just a few more minutes. We try to be organized but a schoolmaster’s day is always just that bit unpredictable. Do please sit down and what will you have to revive you after that beastly drive? You live in Finchley, is that right?”

“Hampstead really,” said the mother. “Sherry would be lovely.” She worked over the headmaster’s wife from shoes to hairstyle, pricing and assessing. Shoes old but expensive—Russell and Bromley. Good skirt. Blouse could be Marks and Sparks—not sure. Real pearls. Super Victorian ring. She’s not gone to any particular trouble—that’s just what she’d wear anyway. You can be confident, with a voice like that, of course. Sally Wilcox says she knows all sorts of people.

The headmaster’s wife said, “I don’t know how much you know about us. Prospectuses don’t tell you a thing, do they? We’ll look round everything in a minute, when you’ve had a chat with my husband. I gather you’re friends of the Wilcoxes, by the way. I’m awfully fond of Simon—he’s down for Winchester, of course, but I expect you know that.”

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5 *Finchley*: part of the London borough of Barnet.

6 *Hampstead*: part of the London borough of Camden—and a much more desirable place to live.

7 *prospectuses*: brochures.
The mother smiled over her sherry. Oh, I know that all right. Sally Wilcox doesn’t let you forget that.

“And this is Charles? My dear, we’ve been forgetting all about you! In a minute I’m going to borrow Charles and take him off to meet some of the boys because after all you’re choosing a school for him, aren’t you, and not for you, so he ought to know what he might be letting himself in for and it shows we’ve got nothing to hide.”

The parents laughed. The father, sherry warming his guts, thought that this was an amusing woman. Not attractive, of course, a bit homespun, but impressive all the same. Partly the voice, of course; it takes a bloody expensive education to produce a voice like that. And other things, of course. Background and all that stuff.

“I think I can hear the thud of the Fourth Form coming in from games, which means my husband is on the way, and then I shall leave you with him while I take Charles off to the common-room.”

For a moment the three adults centered on the child, looking, judging. The mother said, “He looks so hideously pale, compared to those boys we saw outside.”

“My dear, that’s London, isn’t it? You just have to get them out, to get some color into them. Ah, here’s James. James—Mr. and Mrs. Manders. You remember, Bob Wilcox was mentioning at Sports Day . . .”

The headmaster reflected his wife’s style, like paired cards in Happy Families. His clothes were mature rather than old, his skin well-scrubbed, his shoes clean, his geniality untainted by the least condescension. He was genuinely sorry to have kept them waiting, but in this business one lurches from one minor crisis to the next . . . And this is Charles? Hello, there, Charles. His large hand rested for a moment on the child’s head, quite extinguishing the thin, dark hair. It was as though he had but to clench his fingers to crush the skull. But he took his hand away and moved the parents to the window, to observe the mutilated cricket pavilion, with indulgent laughter.

And the child is borne away by the headmaster’s wife. She never touches him or tells him to come, but simply bears him away like some relentless tide, down corridors and through swinging glass doors, towing him like a frail craft, not bothering to look back to see if he is following, confident in the strength of magnetism, or obedience.

4. **REREAD** Reread lines 52–59 and 79–111. What picture of Charles is emerging? What can you infer about how he feels about being at the school? 


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**geniality:**

**indulgent:**
And delivers him to a room where boys are scattered among inky tables and rungless chairs and sprawled on a mangy carpet. There is a scampering, and a rising, and a silence falling, as she opens the door.

“Now this is the Lower Third, Charles, who you’d be with if you come to us in September. Boys, this is Charles Manders, and I want you to tell him all about things and answer any questions he wants to ask. You can believe about half of what they say, Charles, and they will tell you the most fearful lies about the food, which is excellent.”

The boys laugh and groan; amiable, exaggerated groans. They must like the headmaster’s wife: There is licensed repartee. They look at her with bright eyes in open, eager faces. Someone leaps to hold the door for her, and close it behind her. She is gone.

The child stands in the center of the room, and it draws in around him. The circle of children contracts, faces are only a yard or so from him; strange faces, looking, assessing.

Asking questions. They help themselves to his name, his age, his school. Over their heads he sees beyond the window an inaccessible world of shivering trees and high racing clouds and his voice which has floated like a feather in the dusty schoolroom air dies altogether and he becomes mute, and he stands in the middle of them with shoulders humped, staring down at feet: grubby plimsolls and kicked brown sandals. There is a noise in his ears like rushing water, a torrential din out of which voices boom, blotting each other out so that he cannot always hear the words. Do you? they say, and Have you? And What’s your? and the faces, if he looks up, swing into one another in kaleidoscopic patterns and the floor under his feet is unsteady, lifting and falling.

And out of the noises comes one voice that is complete, that he can hear. “Next term, we’ll mash you,” it says. “We always mash new boys.”

And a bell goes, somewhere beyond doors and down corridors, and suddenly the children are all gone, clattering away and leaving him there with the heaving floor and the walls that shift and swing, and the headmaster’s wife comes back and tows him away, and he is with his parents again, and they are getting into the car, and the high hedges skim past the car windows once more, in the other direction, and the gravel under the tires changes to black tarmac.

“Well?”

* licensed repartee: approved witty replies.
* plimsolls: sneakers.

5. As you read lines 112–161, continue to cite textual evidence.

- Underline details that describe the room “where boys are scattered.”
- Underline Charles’s reactions to the other students.
- Circle the threat one student makes. In the margin, explain what you think this threat means and describe Charles’s response.
“I liked it, didn’t you?” The mother adjusted the car around her, closing windows, shrugging into her seat.

“Very pleasant, really. Nice chap.”

“I liked him. Not quite so sure about her.”

“It’s pricey, of course.”

“All the same . . .”

“Money well spent, though. One way and another.”

“Shall we settle it, then?”

“I think so. I’ll drop him a line.”

The mother pitched her voice a notch higher to speak to the child in the back of the car.

“Would you like to go there, Charles? Like Simon Wilcox. Did you see that lovely gym, and the swimming pool? And did the other boys tell you all about it?”

The child does not answer. He looks straight ahead of him, at the road coiling beneath the bonnet of the car. His face is haggard with anticipation.

6. **REREAD AND DISCUSS** Reread lines 137–161. With a small group, make an inference about why Charles does not tell his parents about the boy’s threat. How might the parents have reacted if Charles had told them? Use evidence from the text to support your opinions.

**SHORT RESPONSE**

**Cite Text Evidence** Compare Charles’s outlook on the school with that of his parents. What specific phrases does Lively use to build an understanding of what drives the characters? Cite text evidence to support your analysis.