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**Analyze Text Structure**

Short Story: “The Backward Fall”

RI.7.5: Analyze the structure an author uses to organize a text, including how the major sections contribute to the whole and to the development of the ideas

1. Analyze the use of text features (e.g., graphics, headers, captions) in public documents. CA

RL.7.5: Analyze how a drama or poem’s form or structure (e.g., soliloquy, sonnet) contributes to its meaning

*DIRECTIONS:*

* *Record 10 Annotations/ Notes*
* *Answer 3 Questions at the end of the Reading*
* *Submit to Teacher*

**Fiction Text: “The Backward Fall”**  By Jason Helmandollar

Lexile: 950L

"Dad?" she says. "I swear, I can't remember the words to my own songs." She is sixty-two and sitting on the edge of the couch, her old acoustic guitar perched on her knee.

     Her husband of forty-seven years walks into the living room from the kitchen. "What's that, Mom?" he says. For decades, ever since they had their third child together, he has called her Mom and she has called him Dad.

     "I can't remember how the second verse starts."

     "Well, what are you singing?"

     "You must be ignoring me. I've been trying to sing the same song for the last twenty minutes."

     George, her husband, looks up at the ceiling. "Well, let's see," he says, rubbing the gray stubble of his beard. "Picking Flowers in the Rain?"

     She smiles and strums the guitar with a flourish. "Lucky guess."

     "The second verse is when it starts to rain. Something about drops on the petals, I believe."

     "Of course." She nods her head once. "How could I have forgotten that?"

     She begins to play again, simple chords on a wooden guitar, and sings a song she wrote when she was much younger. It is the story of two lovers who walk in a field of wildflowers. A warm rain begins to fall, and instead of running for shelter, they pick flowers together and realize they are in love.

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"Dad?" she says. She is sixty-four. "Will you get in that closet by the door and …"

     "What's that, Mom?" he says. He is instantly on his feet, poised to do her bidding. "What do you want me to do?"

     He sees the look on her face and lowers himself back into his chair. He hates that look, although he sees it so often it has become his old, evil friend. It is a look of confusion, one of bewildered fear.

     "I forgot what I wanted." She shakes her head, settles back into her own chair.

     "That's all right. It'll come to you."

     She stares straight ahead. Their two recliners are set up in front of the television, but she rarely watches anymore. After a few moments, she turns her head to him. "What are we going to do when I can't remember anything?"

     "The doctors said it might not get any worse. You know that."

     "But what if it does? What if one day I wake up and I've forgotten everything?"

     He reaches across the small table between them and pats her hand. "Then I'll just remind you of everything."

     She smiles at this and the evil look fades away. Above the television is a mantle full of pictures. Her entire family, from her grandparents to her own great-grandchildren, rest on that mantle. She ignores the television and stares at the pictures, even though they are too far away to really see. After a few minutes, she says, "My feet are cold. Will you get me the blanket out of the closet by the door?"

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

"Did you fill up the tank like I told you?" she asks. She is sixty-five. She is also forty-eight. "Once we get on the road, I don't want to have to stop for gas."

     He looks at her for a moment, bobs his head, and turns back to the television.

     "Aren't you going to answer me?"

     "I don't even know what you're talking about, Mom."

     "The tank. Did you fill up the tank?"

     Sighing, he mutes the program he is watching about ancient people in Peru. He has always wanted to see the Incan ruins of Machu Picchu. Several years ago, he embraced the fact that he will never go. "Why would I fill up the car? We never go anywhere but to the grocery store once a week."

     She laughs and shakes her head. "You can be so dull sometimes. The Grand Canyon!"

     "The Grand Canyon?"

     "We're leaving tomorrow."

     "Mom, we went to the Grand Canyon over fifteen years ago. Don't you remember?"

     She raises a finger to correct him, pauses, looks off into nowhere with her eyes unfocused. The finger moves to her bottom lip. "But, I …"

     He watches her for a time as her face voids of all emotion, all evidence of thought. He thinks of the Grand Canyon, which they visited shortly after he retired from the factory on disability. On his first day without a job, he cashed in almost all their chips and bought a motor home. They drove it all over the country – but first, to the Grand Canyon. They called it *The Big Adventure*, their three year jaunt from one ocean to the other and back again. They felt so young during that time.

     He un-mutes his program and, like he does every minute of every day, tries to breathe through the pounding of his heart.

     "I heard they have mules you can ride down into the canyon," she says. "You think that's true?"

     Her hand is resting on the table between them. He reaches over and grasps it. In his mind's eye he sees her body rocking forward and back as the mule traverses the rocky trail, her reddish-gray hair lit from behind by the desert sun.

     "I'm sure of it," he says.

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A hand on his shoulder shakes him from sleep. He props himself up in bed and looks at the clock. Nearly four in the morning. "What is it, Mom? What's wrong?"

     "I need to tell you something." She is sixty-seven. She is thirty-one.

     He sits up and turns on the lamp.

     "Wendell Thurber kissed me on the mouth today," she says.

     "Wendell Thurber?"

     "We've been taking lunch together quite a bit lately and today he kissed me." She lowers her eyes to the blanket. "He did it before I even knew what was happening."

     George remembers this conversation. It was years and years ago, during a time when she worked at the factory for several months to help save for their first real house. He stares at her but says nothing.

     "Here's the thing, George," she says. "Things haven't been right with us for a long time. You don't seem to appreciate me anymore."

     "I appreciate you."

     "You don't act like it."

     At the time, he *hadn't* acted like it. For some reason, he'd fallen into a pattern of ignoring her, of taking her for granted, without even realizing he was doing it. This was the conversation when she had called him out.

     "I've had a crush on Wendell Thurber for a while," she says. "Today, he showed me that he feels the same way." She clutches the blanket to her. "I'm telling you this because I love you. I just want you to know that there are other men out there who might treat me like I deserve to be treated."

     It was quite a chance she took. He could have gotten angry, called her a whore. He could have left. She bet their lives together on his reaction to a kiss from another man. And it worked. Instead of getting angry, he held her in his arms. He changed. He started being nice to her again.

     And then a wonderful thing happened. The more he was kind to her, and did things just to make her happy, the more she did the same thing for him in return. Soon, it was like a contest to see who could be the best spouse, who could give the most love.

     Smiling, he draws her into his arms. "I'll change," he says. "I promise."

    "What are you talking about?" she says.

     He looks down and sees that her eyes are fixed on the clock.

     "It's four in the morning," she says. "What are you doing up?"

     "I … couldn't sleep."

     "Well, turn off the light and try harder." She lies back and turns roughly onto her side.

     He looks at her for a long moment. Then he turns off the lamp and closes his stinging eyes to the dark.

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"I know you stole my ring," she says. "Where is it?" Her eyes are narrow but full of fire. She is twenty-three and sixty-eight.

     "I don't know where it is, Mom." He is standing in the kitchen, pebbles of broken glass from the coffee pot all around his bare feet.

     "You're a liar."

     "You must have hid it again. Just calm down and we'll go look for it."

     She roars, a sound he did not think she was capable of making, and picks up the fruit bowl.

     Pulling his arms up over his face, he says, "Please don't throw anything else at me, Mom."

     "Stop calling me that! I'm not your mother. You're just a dirty old man."

     "Don't you recognize me? It's me, George."

     She slams the bowl back to the counter, hard enough to crack it. "You're not my George. You're an old man. You've got me trapped here. You stole all my money, and now you took my wedding ring."

     "That's not true."

     She says nothing for a moment, breathing hard.

     "I gave you that ring," he says. "I wouldn't ever take it away from you."

     She breathes faster, nearly gasping. Tears ring her eyes and that scrapes at his heart more than anything else.

     "Please," he says.

     Suddenly, she turns and runs out of the kitchen. He hears the slam of the front screen door, and with thoughts of her in the street, missing, hurt, he steps across the broken glass and runs after her. He has not run so hard in years. His heart feels large, bloated in his chest. He brings her down in the mud by the road, his twisted fingers, gnarled by arthritis, pulling at her nightgown. She slaps his face, pounds his chest. He only has the strength to hold her where she is, writhing in the cold mud.

     Soon she ceases thrashing. Her body curls and shakes. He coaxes her to stand and then walk back to the house. When the warm water of the shower is running, he stands in the tub next to her and moves her beneath the spray. The mud rolls from her white hair and her white skin and mixes with the blood that spins in pink spirals from his feet.

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She is sixteen. The old man is staring at her again, but she ignores it as she always does. She has more important things to think about than the nervous, always-crying old man.

     George is coming today. She knows he is coming to ask if he can court her. He courted her sister for a few weeks, but that went nowhere. Her sister is pretty, but George couldn't stop looking over his shoulder at the younger girl with long, dark hair. Today, he is coming for her.

     She steps out onto the front porch. A dirt path trails away from her door, down the hill into the holler, and then around a bend where it disappears into a cove of pines. On the other side of those pines is the wooden bridge that spans the Sandy River and then the railroad tracks.

     She turns her head and sees that the old man is out on the porch now, sitting with his hands crossed in his lap.

     "What do you want?" she says to him.

     Raising his hands in innocence, he replies, "Why, nothing, Mom. I'm just watching the TV."

     The old man is senile. She hardly understands a thing he says.

     She turns back to the path. And there he is, emerging from the pines, wearing jeans and a white t-shirt draped loosely over his thin but sturdy frame. He walks with an easy gait, a little bowlegged, as he makes the bend and then lowers his head for the trek up the long hill. After a time, he looks up and she waves. He acknowledges only with a dip of his head. This is a man too proud to wave, but not too proud to pick a bouquet of wildflowers which she now sees clutched in one of his fists. Those flowers make her smile, and in the back of her mind the words to a song begin to form. She knows without the slightest of doubts that this is the man she will love for the rest of her life.

     "Who are you waving at, Mom?" the old man says.

     "My husband," she says.

     "Well, I'm right over here. You're waving at the wall."

     The poor old man. He is senile, but kind. She turns and waves to him.

     Lifting his hand in return, he says, "Hello, darling."

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The faces are all around her, hovering. She cannot move, but she can watch them. The faces have no names. Within her, there are no memories because she is an infant. She has a vague sense that something has been stripped from her, torn away against her will, but this does not anger her. The faces bring her comfort. For even though they have no names, she knows that they love her, and that she loves them in return.

     She feels herself breathe. Slowly. In and out.

     The faces eclipse her vision, one at a time. Unknown words fall from lips. Tears fall from sad eyes. She breathes in each face and it soothes her. Last is a face that feels familiar. Its shape is familiar – its gritty texture as a cheek presses against her cheek. Familiar lips touch her forehead. She watches this face and realizes that while all information has been stripped away, emotion has remained. Untouched.

     The face fills her with security, and she finds she has the strength to fall backward one last time.

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She is in the womb, surrounded by warm water. In the water, there is no need to breathe. So she stops. Her eyes slide closed.

     She sees George in front of her. He is far away, but he has made the bend. She knows they won't be together for some time, but that is fine. His head is bent down and he has begun the climb up the long hill.

**Questions**

1. **Why is the story titled “The Backward Fall?”**

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1. **What point of view is the story told? How does this point of view help the reader understand the plot?**

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1. **Based on the characters, conflict, and title of the story, what is the theme of the short story? Cite your answer with evidence from the text.**

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