Write an analytical essay (900-1200 words) in which you analyse and interpret the short story "Good-Looking" by Souvankham Thammavongsa, 2021.

Part of your essay must focus on the point of view. In addition, your essay must include an analysis of the style of writing in lines 119 – 128.

In your essay you must include references to the short story.

Good-Looking

By Souvankham Thammavongsa

February 22, 2021

Dad thought himself a good-looking man. He was fit, if you like that sort of thing. He was thirty-eight years old and worked at the gym four days a week for eight hours. He was an instructor for a few exercise classes and filled in when others couldn't make their shifts.

He didn't wear a wedding ring. He said this was good for business. His boss agreed and encouraged the other male instructors not to wear a ring, if they had one—a wife, that is. Dad was encouraged to flirt with women at the gym. Harmless flirting. Talking and smiling and being friendly, being nice. Leave the rest up to the imagination. Mislead, and then apologize. "Exercise, good health—these things don't sell gym memberships!" Dad said. If there were female instructors, Dad never mentioned them. For Mom's sake, I think, and her feelings. He didn't want her to get any ideas, as she had enough of them already.

According to the gym's computer charts and data, most of the members were women, and women were more likely to bring in their friends, too. Men were the worst clients. They took advantage of the free classes, they came alone, and they didn't clean the equipment when they were done. When they lifted weights, they breathed loudly, and when they ran on the treadmill they would grunt and gasp, grab a water bottle and squirt their faces, dripping on their clothes and on the machines. They caused other trouble, too, leering, making inappropriate comments.

Women stayed longer, hanging on for years and coming several times a week for the classes. They picked on themselves, the size of their hips, the skin under their chin. Or their friends picked on them, or other women they didn't know picked on them. Or their boyfriends and husbands and mothers picked on them. The men who came to the gym were mostly single, and when they got

themselves a girlfriend, or got married, they stopped caring about their looks. They were loved. The men didn't count.

Now, I don't know if all these things were true. It's just what I gathered during that time, from what Dad told us about his job and how the gym made decisions. I heard him explain it to Mom, too. She didn't like him not wearing his wedding ring. They fought a lot about that.

Mom had good reason to believe that Dad was someone who would get himself into trouble. It was how they'd met. Mom was a woman who thought with her body. She had a large bosom that spilled out of her clothes, which were always too small and tight. There's no shame in any of that. You make do with what you have, and she did. Before Dad worked at the gym, he worked at a shoe store. Mom worked there, too. She was seventeen at the time, and Dad was married to someone else.

Dad likes to be in love. Loves the romance and the flowers and the dancing. The beginnings, when you don't really know each other, and you're on your best behavior, and you forgive, and you allow certain things to go unnoticed. Like how a gap between two front teeth can seem cute at first, but ten years later you notice how little bits of food get caught and lodged there, the dot of a cavity growing ever larger. Dad always knew he wanted children. So at seventeen he got his high-school sweetheart pregnant. Ten years went by, and he met Mom at work. She was seventeen. Dad gets older, but the women stay the same age. Anyway, he left his wife, and he and Mom started living together after four months, and not long after that I came along, and then my two brothers. Dad was twenty-eight then.

Dad thought he was smart. He read a lot, had a lot of theories. His mind was always racing, on fire. He soaked up information real easy. Probably too easy. He didn't know that some things weren't important, that you had to have a filter. He talked fast. It was hard to keep up. I think that was the point. If you couldn't keep up, you were somehow not as smart. He liked you to think that he was smarter, or at least that he knew how to make you feel like he was.

But every ten years Dad got bored, or something like that. And so it didn't surprise us when he started spending more and more time at work. Mom didn't work, she took care of me and my brothers. And, well, she'd had to quit school when I came into the picture. When you have a family to take care of, there isn't time for school, she said.

There was a woman Dad took a lot of interest in that year. A professor at the local university. Unusual for him. I can't remember her name. Honestly, when you're a kid, you don't think about adults and their names. Now, I love Dad, and I hate to say this, but no way would a man like him

ever get to meet a smart woman like her outside the gym. He never went to college. Had to quit after two weeks, he said. He had a family to take care of. Dad liked to gossip with Mom about the women at the gym. He said there was a woman who went to all his classes, never missed one. Dad described her as having a lot of energy and bounce, said that she was newly divorced. She had been married for fifteen years, and they didn't have children. Poor thing, he said. She was a careful sort of woman, he said.

One day after class, she got up the nerve to ask Dad out. It was brave of her. Other women looked on, didn't have the nerve. Yeah, I guess I would admit now that Dad was pretty good-looking, and, being the instructor and all, everyone paid attention to him, everyone looked at him. All those sit-ups, leg lifts, jumping jacks, pushups. The pushups especially. He had a bit of a smirk on his face when he did them, his knuckles pressed to the floor. He said later that he knew the women were imagining themselves under him, and chuckled at the thought. Mom chuckled, too, when he told her about it. This was her man, after all.

Dad wasn't a drinker. He kept it that way because he was training and working out, and stuff like that just slows you down. When the professor, who knew this, asked him to go out for tea at eight o'clock at night, by her place, Dad agreed. She'd bought one of those long-term gym memberships, a five-year one you pay all at once, so it was good to keep her happy. And if conversation in the off-hours would make her happy, well, he was willing to encourage it. He took me along.

We got to the café early. The professor had picked it, the Loveless Café. I laugh at it now, that name, but at the time I didn't know. How funny that name is, especially looking back.

We lived across town, so it was a bit of a trek, and we took the bus. Dad didn't drive, and we didn't own a car anyway. We got there early and found a spot by the window. When the professor arrived, Dad waved her over to our table. She seemed a bit surprised, her eyes opened wider, and she smiled at me, confused. I guess I could give Dad credit for telling the truth about who I was, for introducing me as his son. She shook my hand the way professional adults do. She looked at Dad, and said, "I didn't know you had a child." He said that he had four, actually, and that I was one of the middle ones. He went on to tell her about Mom. He said, "My wife and I, we still go out on dates together," like that was a thing to be proud of, something that would impress the professor, as if he were some rare find, a man still dating his wife. "Oh, I didn't know you were married," she said, and she gave a little forced smile. He said, "Yup, ten years." He paused, and she looked at the table between us. "We exercise together, too. She gained a bit of weight after the babies." Like it hadn't been him who'd made the babies, too. "I don't want any more children. I'm done," he said, as if he'd been the one in labor for days, all just to be sliced open like a ripe peach and never lined

back up right. I didn't have to be a grown man then to know it just wasn't proper—what he said and how he was saying it.

Then Dad's phone rang, as if right on cue, and it was Mom, asking him where he was. He said, "I'm out with a friend, from work . . . yeah, he's with me." Then he put his phone down, smiled sheepishly, and said to the professor, "She didn't grow up here. So she gets a bit jealous sometimes."

Now, I wouldn't have blamed the woman if she had just grabbed her coat and walked out. I saw her look at the entrance and then look back at me as if I should tell her what to do. There was something sad in her eyes, and they shone like the candles in the glass jars in the café. Maybe she lived in an armpit of an apartment and didn't want to go back there to feel how wide and empty and cold the bed was, or to hear mice scuttling around the floor, looking for crumbs. The night didn't offer any kind of promise or potential, since I was there. She was the type of woman who thought about a kid like me, how it might affect me. Even though she wanted something for herself, she wouldn't act on that want. But she still could have had Dad. He was what you would call easy.

I watched Dad. He couldn't take his eyes off the professor. I'd never heard him talk so much about books. The professor was quiet. She nodded and held her teacup for warmth. At one point, I saw her shiver. She looked out the front window of the café, at the street, at the snow, and, instead of maybe letting her sit in her quiet, Dad continued on about architecture and how cities were built and about the books he read. I wanted to hear the woman's voice. When she spoke, it was assured and confident and warm. Intelligent people, I think, can just sit with their knowledge because they don't have anything to prove. Dad talked like a motorboat, revving the engine. I felt sorry for him then. At one point, she asked a question, and it's stuck with me. Her voice was so clear and bare. She said, "How did you know love would happen for you again?" It was a sweet question, a hopeful one. A question that someone naïve would ask. There's nothing wrong with being naïve. I'm not knocking it. It's just that, to be naïve at a time like this, well, you just feel a little for someone like that. It was a question that would come from a woman who believed in magic and romance, in second chances. Dad, the brute that he was, said, "That's life," and shrugged, like love was a thing that could happen to you over and over again.

It occurs to me, almost forty years later, that Dad probably didn't know what love was. Not love as something that was fun to have around or to feel and grab at, but the kind that you were afraid to lose because it wasn't easy to find in the first place. He was so sure he had it, though, and that it had arrived over and over and over—it wasn't just talk and promises but banged into flesh and blood and life. There I was.

The professor, with no kids to prove her love, had nothing except her word. And what good was a word in the world?

She tipped her teacup toward herself, looking in there to make sure there was nothing left. And then she glanced at her wrist, where a beautiful shiny watch was clipped. It was the kind of thing that didn't just tell the time but was worn as jewelry, too. She said, "It's getting late. I'd better get going." Now, I hate to say this, and bless his heart, but Dad had talked all night, looking like a dumb fool, a chunk of muscle.

The professor got up and put on her coat. She paid for our drinks and left a tip. Dad made a gesture, but she waved it away. Dad said, "I'll get it next time," as if there would ever be a next time.

We all walked out of the café together. A bus came by. Someone on that bus seeing the three of us on the street might have thought we were a family. The professor pointed in the direction she was heading, the opposite of ours, and Dad stood close and opened his arms for her to lean into. She stepped into his embrace, and stepped out. Then she turned around and walked away, her spine straight and her footsteps quick in the snow.

Dad said, "Let's go, little buddy," and, walking away, I took one final look at her. I saw her stop. I thought she would come back, but she did not. She paused for a moment, raised her arm, wiped something from her face, and kept walking.

I have to say that, though she was someone I had seen only once in my life, I loved her. I felt a sad gloom like on the last day of a summer vacation, when you try to take photographs of everything. You know you might not ever come back, might not ever get to see any of it again. She was like that to me. The professor could have invited Dad over to her place. It was, after all, so close by. They could have gone into the bedroom together and left me in the living room, with the television on loud. If it had been the other way around, that's exactly what Mom would have done. Taken him home, that's for sure.

Dad started wearing his wedding ring after that night. Maybe he knew he had a good thing, whatever it was he had with Mom and us. I don't know if the professor ever came back to the gym. He never mentioned her.

It is their fiftieth anniversary, Mom and Dad's. That's a big number, isn't it? Everyone's raising a glass. *Clink.* Dad, getting down on one knee, talking about what a lucky man he is. The love of his life, he says. *Clink.* Winks to family and friends looking on. Real charming. *Clink*, *clink*. The display.

And that’s the thing that got me thinking, I guess. What do we mean by the love of our life? We think it’s the person who’s been there, in front of us, all these years. But might it be the near-misses, the ones who didn’t take us home, who didn’t come back?

“Aren’t they the happiest?” a voice near me said. I didn’t say anything to that and looked at the champagne glass I held. All the air bubbles rising, surfacing, sparkling. ♦