



## Student Performance Q&A:

### 2001 AP<sup>®</sup> English Literature and Composition Free-Response Questions

The following comments are provided by the Chief Faculty Consultant regarding the 2001 free-response questions for AP English Literature and Composition. *They are intended to assist AP workshop consultants as they develop training sessions to help teachers better prepare their students for the AP Exams.* They give an overview of each question and its performance, including typical student errors. General comments regarding the skills and content that students frequently have the most problems with are included. Some suggestions for improving student performance in these areas are also included. Consultants are encouraged to use their expertise to create strategies for teachers to improve student performance in specific areas.

*What was intended by the questions?*

*How well did the students perform?*

*What were common errors or omissions?*

*What were common threads of error?*

*What can teachers do to improve performance?*

**Question 1.** Comparison/contrast of William Wordsworth's poem, "London, 1802" with Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem, "Douglass."

*What was intended by the question?*

Students were given two texts: William Wordsworth's "London, 1802" in which the speaker expresses a need for someone of Milton's ilk to respond to England's ills in 1802; and Paul Laurence Dunbar's "Douglass" in which the speaker makes an appeal for someone like Douglass to respond to America's ills at the turn of the century. Students were asked to read both poems carefully, and then were asked to write an essay in which they compared and contrasted the two poems with an analysis of the relationship between the two.

*How well did the students perform? What were common errors or omissions? What were common threads of error?*

Since the prompt itself sets up the idea that both poems were responses to conditions of a particular time and place, concern was expressed by many AP teachers that only students who had a historical knowledge of the sociopolitical conditions implicit in both poems could possibly earn the higher scores. Those fears were put to rest by the careful wording of the scoring guide for Question 1. Students who wrote an effective analysis of the relationship between the two poems without referencing the historical background could indeed earn the higher scores. Analyzing how the language of poetry differs and is similar in both poems proved a very legitimate approach to the task set before the students.

Question 1, the poetry question, is customarily, as one might expect, the most difficult of the three questions for students to handle. This year, however, that didn't seem to be the case. The adjusted mean score for the poetry question was 4.91. It was higher this year than the adjusted mean score for the open question, which was 4.55. Many readers observed that in this year's Reading of the poetry question more students got scores in the middle range and fewer of them received scores in the bottom quarter than was the case last year. This observation, I believe, underscores the notion that the question was more accessible to students this year, and even more accessible than was Question 3. The adjusted mean score of the poetry question last year was 4.77, slightly lower than for this year.

Gone from the prompt this year were the suggestions of poetic elements for possible discussion. This absence was purposeful, in the hope that students would explore aspects of the poems beyond diction, tone, or imagery. While there were, of course, a range of responses, students who read insightfully, possessed the vocabulary of poetry, and wrote well produced stunning essays. An example from such a student writer is the following:

The essential similarity between Wordsworth's "London" and Dunbar's "Douglass" is the tone of discontent and nostalgic longing in each. Both works express a desire for a great man of the past to remedy the wrongs that have befallen London and America. The poems are both odes to specific figures and, at the same time, criticisms of contemporary societies in a broad sense.

Another student writer wrote:

The most salient, common element in these two works, aside from their obvious common theme, is the reference to voice. Wordsworth says, "Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea." Similarly, Dunbar writes, "Oh for thy voice high-sounding o'er the storm." In both cases "voice" can be interpreted as the ideology professed in the works of Milton and Douglass.

Such responses as those just quoted were representative of the better essays, but they were, unfortunately, few in number. Many of the student writers even when they did attempt to discuss common or contrasting poetic elements could say little beyond the obvious things with regard to poetic form and content, and often merely pointed out a particular poetic convention without making meaningful connections.

### ***What can teachers do to improve performance?***

There are several issues that we as teachers of poetry must consider. First, if students are going to perform well on this section of the AP Literature Examination, they must be equipped with the tools necessary to engage in reading, thinking about, and writing about poetry. They must read widely, be given rigorous instruction in the elements of poetry beyond the rudiments, and they must continue to receive instruction and practice in developing their writing skills. Secondly, we must continue to provide the AP Examination takers with rich, accessible poems and carefully constructed prompts that will generate a high quality of writing from them. We want students to do well, and we understand that one of the purposes of the examination is to separate the very best from the best and the best from the mediocre, but we must continue to offer students examinations that enable them to shine rather than to demonstrate their failures. Thirdly, there is a growing sense among the readers of Question 1, that we as teachers must have a conversation among ourselves, at a forum other than the lunch table, about what we expect from our students when we teach and they learn how to analyze poetry.

**Question 2.** Passage from Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones*

***What was intended by the question?***

Students were asked to read the passage in Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones* where Squire Allworthy discovers the infant in his bed. They were then asked to analyze the techniques Fielding employs to characterize Mr. Allworthy and Mrs. Deborah Wilkins.

***How well did the students perform?***

The passage, while similar to last year’s question about Addison’s *Diarist*, in that both are eighteenth-century texts, was far more accessible to this year’s students. Students were not directly confronted with demonstrating their working knowledge of satire as a literary genre, but were challenged to see how an author creates character differences by means of language, setting, tone, and circumstances. The very best students were able to use the language of drama to discuss the character differences, noting how the novelist/dramatist sets up the incident of the discovery of the baby, focused upon the responses that followed from the discovery, and then showed how those dramatic responses, developed primarily through dialogue, characterized their respective speakers. Even the weaker students could write themselves into the middle range of scores. They generally wrote longer essays this year than last, made greater use of quotations from the text itself, and had more to say about Squire Allworthy and Mrs. Deborah Wilkins than they did of Addison’s *Diarist*. Many of these responses from the weaker students, however, revealed that students were not familiar with the techniques of character revelation.

***What can teachers do to improve performance?***

So many students were unable to discuss the issues of structure, of narration, and of point of view. To address this inability, students might profit from classroom discussion of key passages in E. M. Forester’s *Aspects of the Novel*, Wayne Booth’s *The Rhetoric of Fiction* and other critical texts which explore other rhetorical devices,” in addition to knowing the strategies of Perrine’s *Sound and Sense*.

**Question 3:** The Open Question on “madness” as “Divinest Sense”

***What was intended by the question?***

Students were asked to select a novel or a play in which a character’s apparent madness or irrational behavior plays an important role, to explain how that behavior can be judged reasonable, and then to relate its significance to the work as a whole. This was indeed a challenging question for most students. It was complex, not easily adapted to the five-paragraph essay, and not readily given to simple paraphrase.

This year’s question lent itself to a generic response more or less conceived of beforehand. Some AP Literature classes seem not to have studied any books with any real “madness” in them. As a result, there was a great deal of straining to define “mad” behavior. Virtually none of these students seems to have been acquainted with the archetype of the “mad” prophet/fool who spouts insights far more penetrating than those of the sane people about him. Virtually every student interpreted the question to mean some people who seem eccentric actually have good reasons for acting so oddly. This interpretation seems not to have lent itself to penetrating writing.

The best writers were able to connect the significance of the “madness” to the work as a whole through the idea of theme. The very best writers moved beyond theme to observations on the relation of theme to some broader context of human experience — showing how theme contributes to our understanding of what it is to be human. These best writers could comment on the criticism of imperialism implicit in *Heart of Darkness*, give a feminist interpretation of

Janey's actions in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, or discuss philosophical ideas of the dichotomies of appearance and reality of words and deeds in *Hamlet*.

A listing of strategies employed by some of the better writers:

- choose an uncommon work
  - begin quickly and forego long half-page introductions
  - avoid repeating the prompt
  - organize their responses into coherent paragraphs
  - use details in the service of their generalities
  - use transitions so that the readers didn't struggle finding some implied connections
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### **What can teachers do to improve performance?**

These suggestions are merely reminders of things you already know and perhaps are already doing in your own classes.

1. In your AP classes choose texts that truly challenge your students. Teach them to read closely, attentively, and comprehensively. Turn your classes into workshops in which the students are constantly reading, analyzing, writing papers, sharing their observations about literature with each other, and always learning what constitutes good writing.
2. Educate your students out of literal-mindedness. Open up to them the language of poetry, that is, the metaphorical control of language. Teach them to recognize irony in texts that they can both *see* and *hear*. Have them read plays within the classroom in which they as actors come to understand the tone of language, the implication of language, and the subtext that is often unspoken but felt. Teach them the subtleties of language, which can be gained from a close reading of a text within the classroom, a text acted out by the students. Teach them how playwrights craft their plays through the techniques of character revelation.
3. Do not ignore the study of poetry. It is perhaps the most demanding of the genres and the least appreciated by the students. Encourage them to write their own poems, to explore ways in which they can express feeling through the use of metaphoric language. Have them read poems aloud in order to begin the process of their understanding of the nuances of sound and sense. Show them how structure can often be the door to meaning.
4. In class assignments, teach them how to write analytically, to make meaningful connections within the text itself, or to other literatures, or to life itself. Point out to them when they are merely retelling the plot. Tell them to avoid plot summaries. Remind them that paraphrase should always be in the service of analysis. They may know the meaning of many literary terms, but merely pointing out examples of them in a quoted passage or a poem is insufficient. It is their responsibility to make meaningful connections beyond mere definition.
5. When preparing your students for the exam, be sure to tell them to read the prompt of each question very carefully. To think about the implications of the question, to begin thinking about how they will organize their responses, and to focus on what is asked of them are all important strategies in beginning the writing task. Often, they are asked to select a play or a novel to answer a particular question. Make sure they know that the work they have selected is appropriate to the question asked. See to it that students have a fair range of readings that they feel familiar with, ones that they can test the implications of the question and make the decision of the appropriateness of the work to the question asked. Without this flexibility they may force an answer that will come across as canned to the AP reader. Remind students to

enter into the text itself, to supply concrete illustrations that substantiate the points they are making. Have them take command of what they are writing with authority by means of direct quotation of pertinent information from the text, always writing into the question and never away from it. Help them to keep their point of view consistent, to select appropriate material for supporting evidence, and to write in a focused and succinct manner.

6. As a reminder, tell your students that when selecting works of literature for their responses that short stories and films are not considered appropriate for this level of testing.
7. Suggest to students that when they begin answering the question, they shouldn't engage in a mechanical repetition of the prompt and then supply a list of literary devices. Instead, get them to think of ways to integrate the language of literature with the content of that literature, making connections that are meaningful and telling, engaging in analysis that leads to the synthesis of new ideas. Pressure them into using higher levels of critical thinking. Have them go beyond the obvious and search for a more penetrating relationship of ideas. Make them see connections that they missed on their first reading of the text.
8. And finally, build students' confidence as readers and interpreters of literature. Reward them for what they do well, a well-known phrase in all AP rubrics.