



## AP<sup>®</sup> English Literature 1999 Scoring Commentary

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**Question 1**

**Sample A**

Doubtless there are other essays that convey the poem's meaning in a more compelling fashion than this essay manages — or that supply fuller readings of the rich imagery and diction found in "Blackberry-Picking." However, this is one whale of an essay! So much information is provided by this lengthy piece that it seems perverse to fault the essay because of a vexing omission or dubious assertion ("casual form," for instance?). The expertise as well as the ambition of the writer is apparent from the outset with the sophisticated technical observations about syntax, rhyme, and meter. If these comments do not hold up to scrutiny in their entirety, we forgive the lapses and credit the attempt, amazed at what the writer has accomplished! (Dissection of sound effects simply does not occur in other essays to any appreciable extent.) Similarly, we overlook the several errors in writing: the subject-verb disagreement in the first sentence, for example, or the awkward syntax that results a time or two when the student tries to combine specific examples with commentary.

The student proceeds with a stunning level of analytical command. A commitment to using details to illustrate points is obvious, and the writer has impressive facility with the vocabulary appropriate to literary criticism. Furthermore, the essay reflects an innate sensitivity to the speaker's tone by suggesting the complex tensions between enthusiasm and disappointment, joy and pain, life and death that persist throughout "Blackberry-Picking." The writer notes the separation between the two parts of the poem as a function of form and content — the second segment brings overwhelming confirmation of the appalling futility of the effort to "hoard" the berries. However, he or she understands that the language that describes the boy's eager blackberry-picking experiences in the first section incorporates the seasoned reaction of the adult: disappointment is inherent in the boyish hope the young writer describes with such conviction.

Even when the student lacks precision in an explanation, he or she does not superimpose "higher meanings" upon the literal images and actions of the poem, but renders meaning as integral to the language and various poetic elements that create and convey it. In sum, both the poet and the young critic who writes so ably about Heaney's artistry view with compassion the ongoing nature of the human struggle to stay the unstayable. The student's full embrace of the joy and exuberance conveyed in the blackberry struggle is inspiring evidence of his or her own youthful enthusiasm for life — and for poetry. The mature regard for the natural law of decline and death is similarly impressive. Imagine what he or she might do with a second — or third — draft of this essay!

**Sample B**

This essay is much less multi-dimensional than the very rich one provided by the first young writer, and more is suggested and implied than fully developed in its discussion. The student seems to intuit the strengths of the poem, but fails to describe its artistry with clarity or sustained

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**Question 1 (cont.)**

precision. This student of course deserves no points for spelling, though scorers recognize that in a normal compositional mode, the computer's spell-check would save the writer. Probably we are more forgiving of such errors than we used to be, but unquestionably the essay's virtues must be looked upon to compensate for such apostasy. The compactness of the two-paragraph approach (one paragraph devoted to each segment of the poem) seems less than efficient here. The complex point of view of the poem is ignored in the basic contrast that the essay emphasizes between the living berries and the fermenting product.

Nonetheless, there are strengths. The writer clearly senses the inherent losses built into the doomed effort to sustain the vitality of the blackberry-picking experience or, indeed, the blackberries themselves. Several apt comments focusing on diction and imagery deserve reward. Although many observations lack full development, and the references to the poet's techniques seem arbitrary rather than systematic, the student takes pains to make suggestions about the power of the poem's language, even to honoring its aural effects. Notably, the discussion of the rhyming words (clot, knot, rot, not) provides important support to the student's argument about the essential contrasts between life and death that he or she feels are the poet's preoccupation and concern.

**Sample C**

This student got the word on the five-paragraph essay and dutifully pulled off a focused piece tracking "love and loss." The essay boasts an introduction that is more than a restatement of the question; three paragraphs highlighting form, diction, and metaphor; and a conclusion that in spite of its brevity serves to reassert the thesis that has been doggedly, if incompletely, developed. However, there is very little analysis in this piece, though enough to push it into the upper half. Several minor errors (such as the misuse of "it's") also blight the effort.

The contrast between love and loss oversimplifies the conflicts and tensions in the poem, but it is not wrong. However, the writer provides justifications for the lengths of the stanzas that are forced; and the assertions made in reference to the phrases that describe "the love of blackberry harvesting" prove all but unconvincing. (Perhaps "love" and "thickened wine" are naturally linked, but the connection is not clear from the remarks here.) Readers of this essay may also be uncomfortable with the cavalier identification of the speaker as "the author."

Although the writer of this essay seemed to respond to the fundamental tension in the poem, his or her understanding and discussion of the poet's artistic strategy is limited to essentially problematic observations. Thus the tidy ordering of this essay cannot compensate for its limited content. Though the writer is competent to sense multiple levels of meaning in this poem and to shape a coherent essay, albeit formulaic, this piece does less than the other two essays to explain the power of the poem.

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**Question 2**

**Sample A**

This ponderous analysis captures and conveys the thematic impulses of the passage as well as its powerful artistry. The devices the essayist discusses are familiar and conventional — "figurative language, diction, sentence structure, rhythm, and repetition" — but the comments as to how they contribute to the atmosphere of mystery and reverence in the passage are astonishingly astute: probing, precise, and illuminating. The student never falls upon paraphrase or recapitulation of plot to provide an organization for these remarks, and he or she sustains the connections between observed details and their overall function in the poem. A few spelling errors and other brief lapses (such fine points as inconsistencies with respect to placement of quotation marks with other punctuation, for instance — hardly a hanging offense) mar an essay that otherwise requires little revision, even if its writer had additional hours to accomplish that task. The student sees with a keen inner eye the situation described by McCarthy — and fully comprehends its significance. What 200-level college literature class would not welcome this student's presence?

The studied approach reflected in this outstanding analysis is effectively contrasted with the imaginative flights of another fine essay (see the next sample) that evokes the spirit of McCarthy's piece in its own introduction.

**Sample B**

Some readers might resist as indulgent the emotional renderings of this essay; those who disdain McCarthy's passage as melodramatic to a fault would perhaps similarly dislike this student effort. Yet the student's language clearly conveys a sensitive reading of the passage and an ability to grasp the full intensity of both text and sub-texts. Enthusiastic response to the tone of the passage and faithful evocation of the high mystery conveyed in the experience that the McCarthy piece describes are underscored with keen analytical commentary.

The discussion of the light and dark imagery of the passage, particularly the extended reference to the fire, points to the relationship between concrete, literal image, and symbol and thus one very important authorial technique. Examples of effective syntax are threaded through a number of other significant observations about imagery — all in the service of capturing and conveying the atmosphere and mood of the transfiguring event.

Perhaps additional development of all these details would have made this essay stronger, but the essay as is demonstrates admirable focus on the contributions of some of the most effective images to the author's emphatic emphasis on "mystery" and "enigma." The integrity of the student essay as it shaped its own design — as well as the student's appreciation for links between sense and spirit — make it worthy of reward.

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**Question 2 (cont.)**

**Sample C**

Aware and intrigued by the guilt of the protagonist, the writer of this essay prompts questions about possible familiarity with the novel — or perhaps negates the notion that guilt is less than self-evident within the context of the passage as excerpted. However, tracking the reader's growing awareness of the protagonist's guilt may not be the best way to illuminate the dramatic transformations within this text. Nonetheless, the student writer's observations about the "burning scrim" and "dosing penitent" support his argument well, and this essay is focused and well-directed.

Though allusions to the mission and style of other writers do not always provide effective connections, this student's comparisons of McCarthy's characterizations and prose strategies to those of other authors are not without merit. The Dostoevsky may be reaching, but the reference to Hemingway's style is apt — and represents perhaps another evidence of previous contact with this novel. No matter: the rhythms and syntax compare, and the educated linkage adds to the value of this student's discussion.

This essay provides too little analysis of the passage to rank with the essays above. But the material that the essay does contain is intelligent and cohesive. This essay then makes an upper-half score.

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**Question 3**

**Sample A**

This gifted student writer designed an essay structure that served the illuminating thesis very effectively. In the course of a model introduction — one that offered a commendably specific statement of Tayo's conflict and its thematic implications for the novel — the student mentioned three strategies by which Silko conveys her conviction that it "is necessary to draw on one's past to resolve the problems of today." Including important dimensions of characterization, the role of myth, and a Native American's understanding of time as a contributing factor in the architecture of the novel, this selection of artistic strategies provides the basis for an analysis that is as probing as it is productive. The student is able to emphasize each of the three different techniques in consecutive sections of the essay that correspond to stages of Tayo's growth and maturation. Thus he or she moves chronologically through the novel, supplying appropriate context for observations without burdening the reader with labored paraphrase or too much inconsequential plot. Nor does the essay stray or lose focus; the reader never gets lost.

The student displays an overall grasp of the novel that is decidedly impressive, and the sophisticated command of detail is all but astonishing. The essay is entirely responsive to the problem imposed by the question; the very occasional errors in writing are clearly a function of necessary haste. The evaluator can only celebrate this essay by awarding it the highest score.

**Sample B**

This essay is far less intentional than the one on Ceremony when it comes to defining techniques that convey the conflict with which the chosen character struggles. But this student writer clearly understands the drama at the heart of Paul D's conflict between his love for Sethe and the burdens of his past. The essay describes the struggle in convincing detail, emphasizing the narrative line that particularly engages Paul D. There seems to be a good bit of plot summary in this essay, but at least it is used with important result: the events that have occurred or that are occurring are fundamental to the discussion of the tension that torments the character of Paul D. Additionally, since Paul D. is not the primary character of the novel, his characterization becomes a technique in itself. His problem provides an important underscoring of the polarized themes of love and loss, hope and fear, identity and dissolution, and freedom and responsibility that are demonstrated in the conflicts of Sethe herself.

This writer manages to use memorized citations with reasonable effectiveness, particularly the repeated reference to Paul D's tobacco tin. Probably much of this student's essay would have appeared in a response, regardless of what question had been supplied on the exam. However, the writer adapts the material he or she has clearly prepared in advance with a large measure of success, working a way through the tale of Paul D. to reach a crescendo of insight in the final paragraph.

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**Question 3 (cont.)**

**Sample C**

This essay on *The Scarlet Letter* chooses an ideal character for the task at hand from an exceptionally appropriate novel. It may be a challenge to fail the task at hand with Arthur Dimmesdale as one's focus. The essay writer sets up Dimmesdale's predicament effectively and even ties his analysis to a welcome evaluation of Dimmesdale as Hawthorne's primary study of characterization in the work. This observation, mentioned with slight contradiction in the introduction of the essay but reached with conviction at its close, contributes real consequence to this study of the conflicted Dimmesdale.

The clarity with which the student explains the tension between Dimmesdale's obligation to be steadfast and above reproach lest he disillusion his parishioners, and Dimmesdale's opposing need to square himself with his conscience and his God is commendable. Nonetheless, the discussion of the character seems at some distance from the text and relies on rather large generalizations to make its case.

There is perhaps too little about this essay that rings with exciting insight or that freshly illuminates the novel; but nonetheless, the characterization as supplied is competent and faithful to a reasonable reading of Hawthorne's carefully crafted text. The student writes grammatical, even graceful prose — but the essay just does not give us enough in-depth analysis to deserve the very highest scores. The predictable resolution to which the young writer brings Dimmesdale at the conclusion of this essay collapses the ambiguities of Hawthorne's novel. This flattening of the text may communicate the student's susceptibility to a somewhat oversimplified interpretation that has perhaps been extracted from class discussions of the work. (The writer's potential as an English student may be enhanced in the future when he or she enjoys confrontation with life's rich disorder!) Everything here is just a little too pat. The writing is tidy and efficient as it builds the case for first one pressing option, then another, then Dimmesdale's final confession and subsequent death.

The implications that Dimmesdale's struggle has for the overall meaning of the novel are nicely summed up in a theme that sounds rather like a moral: the consequences of sin can be "devastating." True enough. But would that the essay were not quite so reductive in its earnest approach.