



AP English Language and Composition 2001 Free-Response Questions

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2001 AP® ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND COMPOSITION
FREE-RESPONSE QUESTIONS

ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND COMPOSITION

SECTION II

Total time—2 hours

Question 1

(Suggested time—40 minutes. This question counts one-third of the total essay section score.)

The letter below was written in 1866 by the English novelist Marian Evans Lewes (who used the pen name George Eliot) in response to a letter from an American woman, Melusina Fay Peirce.

Read the letter carefully. Then write an essay in which you analyze the rhetorical strategies Lewes uses to establish her position about the development of a writer.

My dear Madam

Line I do not usually answer letters unless they demand
an answer, finding the days too short for much corre-
spondence; but I am so deeply touched by your words
5 of tenderness and by the details you tell me about
yourself, that I cannot keep total silence towards you.

My consciousness is not of the triumphant kind
your generous joy on my behalf leads you to imagine.
Exultation is a dream before achievement, and rarely
comes after. What comes after, is rather the sense
10 that the work has been produced within one, like
offspring, developing and growing by some force
of which one's own life has only served as a vehicle,
and that what is left of oneself is only a poor husk.
Besides, the vision of something that life might be
15 and that one's own ignorance and incompleteness
have hindered it from being, presses more and more
as time advances. The only problem for us, the only
hope, is to try and unite the utmost activity with the
utmost resignation. Does this seem melancholy?
20 I think it is less melancholy than any sort of self-
flattery.

I want to tell you not to fancy yourself old because
you are thirty, or to regret that you have not yet
written anything. It is a misfortune to many that they
25 begin to write when they are young and give out all
that is genuine and peculiar in them when it can be
no better than trashy, unripe fruit. There is nothing
more dreary than the life of a writer who has early
exhausted himself. I enter into those young struggles
30 of yours to get knowledge, into the longing you feel
to do something more than domestic duties while yet
you are held fast by womanly necessities for neatness
and household perfection as well as by the lack of
bodily strength. Something of all that I have gone
35 through myself. I have never known perfect health,
and I have known what it was to have close ties

making me feel the wants of others as my own and to
have very little money by which these wants could be
met. Before that, I was too proud and ambitious to
40 write: I did not believe that I could do anything fine,
and I did not choose to do anything of that mediocre
sort which I despised when it was done by others.
I began, however, by a sort of writing which had no
great glory belonging to it, but which I felt certain
45 I could do faithfully and well. This resolve to work
at what did not gratify my ambition, and to care only
that I worked faithfully, was equivalent to the old
phrase—"using the means of grace." Not long after
that, I wrote fiction which has been thought a great
50 deal of—but the satisfaction I have got out of it has
not been exactly that of ambition. When we are young
we say, "I should be proud if I could do that." Having
done it, one finds oneself the reverse of proud.

I will say no more about myself except that you
55 must not imagine my position to be at all like
Romola's.¹ I have the best of husbands, the most
sympathetic of companions; indeed, I have more than
my share of love in a world where so many are pining
for it. Mr. Lewes,² who cares supremely for science,
60 is interested in what you say of your husband's
labours; and he is so delighted when anything good or
pretty comes to me that I think he is more grateful to
you than I am for your generous, affectionate words.
Yet I too am not insensible, but shall remain always

Yours in grateful memory
M. E. Lewes.

¹ Romola: the isolated, unhappily married main character in one of Eliot's novels

² Mr. Lewes: Eliot's common-law husband, a prominent philosopher

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Question 2

(Suggested time—40 minutes. This question counts one-third of the total essay section score.)

Carefully read the following passage from “Owls” by Mary Oliver. Then write an essay in which you analyze how Oliver’s style conveys the complexity of her response to nature.

When the great horned [owl] is in the trees its
razor-tipped toes rasp the limb, flakes of bark fall
through the air and land on my shoulders while
Line I look up at it and listen to the heavy, crisp, breathy
5 snapping of its hooked beak. The screech owl I can
imagine on my wrist, also the delicate saw-whet that
flies like a big soft moth down by Great Pond. And
I can imagine sitting quietly before that luminous
wanderer the snowy owl, and learning, from the white
10 gleam of its feathers, something about the Arctic. But
the great horned I can’t imagine in any such proximity
—if one of those should touch me, it would be to the
center of my life, and I must fall. They are the pure
wild hunters of our world. They are swift and
15 merciless upon the backs of rabbits, mice, voles,
snakes, even skunks, even cats sitting in dusky yards,
thinking peaceful thoughts. I have found the headless
bodies of rabbits and bluejays, and known it was the
great horned owl that did them in, taking the head
20 only, for the owl has an insatiable craving for the taste
of brains. I have walked with prudent caution down
paths at twilight when the dogs were puppies. I know
this bird. If it could, it would eat the whole world.

In the night, when the owl is less than exquisitely
25 swift and perfect, the scream of the rabbit is terrible.
But the scream of the owl, which is not of pain and
hopelessness, and the fear of being plucked out of
the world, but of the sheer rollicking glory of the
death-bringer, is more terrible still. When I hear it
30 resounding through the woods, and then the five black
pellets of its song dropping like stones into the air,
I know I am standing at the edge of the mystery, in
which terror is naturally and abundantly part of life,
part of even the most becalmed, intelligent, sunny life
35 —as, for example, my own. The world where the owl

is endlessly hungry and endlessly on the hunt is the
world in which I live too. There is only one world.

Sometimes, while I have stood listening to the
owl’s auguring song drifting through the trees, when
40 it is ten degrees above nothing and life for any small
creature is hard enough without *that*, I have found
myself thinking of summer fields. Fields full of
flowers— poppies or lupines. Or, here, fields where
the roses hook into the dunes, and their increase is
45 manyfold. All summer they are red and pink and
white tents of softness and nectar, which wafts and
hangs everywhere— a sweetness so palpable and
excessive that, before it, I’m struck, I’m taken, I’m
conquered, I’m washed into it, as though it was a
50 river, full of dreaming and idleness—I drop to the
sand, I can’t move; I am restless no more; I am
replete, supine, finished, filled to the last edges with
an immobilizing happiness. And is this not also
terrible? Is this not also frightening?

Are the roses not also— even as the owl is—
55 excessive? Each flower is small and lovely, but in
their sheer and silent abundance the roses become an
immutable force, as though the work of the wild roses
was to make sure that all of us who come wandering
over the sand may be, for a while, struck to the heart
60 and saturated with a simple happiness. Let the mind
be teased by such *stretches* of the imagination, by
such balance. Now I am cringing at the very sound of
the owl’s dark wings opening over my head—not
65 long ago I could do nothing but lounge on the sand
and stare into the cities of the roses.

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Question 3

(Suggested time— 40 minutes. This question counts one-third of the total essay section score.)

Carefully read the following passage by Susan Sontag. Then write an essay in which you support, refute, or qualify Sontag's claim that photography limits our understanding of the world. Use appropriate evidence to develop your argument.

Photography implies that we know about the world if we accept it as the camera records it. But this is the opposite of understanding, which starts from *not* accepting the world as it looks. All possibility of understanding is rooted in the ability to say no. Strictly speaking, one never understands anything from a photograph. Of course, photographs fill in blanks in our mental pictures of the present and the past: for example, Jacob Riis's images of New York squalor in the 1880's are sharply instructive to those unaware that urban poverty in late-nineteenth-century America was really that Dickensian. Nevertheless, the camera's rendering of reality must always hide more than it discloses. As Brecht points out, a photograph of the Krupp works* reveals virtually nothing about that organization. In contrast to the amorous relation, which is based on how something looks, understanding is based on how it functions. And functioning takes place in time and must be explained in time. Only that which narrates can make us understand.

The limit of photographic knowledge of the world is that, while it can goad conscience, it can, finally, never be ethical or political knowledge. The knowledge gained through still photographs will always be some kind of sentimentalism, whether cynical or humanist. It will be a knowledge at bargain prices—a semblance of knowledge, a semblance of wisdom. . . . The very muteness of what is, hypothetically, comprehensible in photographs is what constitutes their attraction and provocativeness. The omnipresence of photographs has an incalculable effect on our ethical sensibility. By furnishing this already crowded world with a duplicate one of images, photography makes us feel that the world is more available than it really is. Needing to have reality confirmed and experience enhanced by photographs is an aesthetic consumerism to which everyone is now addicted. Industrial societies turn their citizens into image-junkies; it is the most irresistible form of mental pollution.

—*On Photography*, 1977

* Krupp: a German weapons manufacturing firm that was instrumental in the Nazi rearmament effort of the 1930's.

END OF EXAMINATION