AP English Literature Free Response Questions

1970 – 2012

1970: Choose a character from a work of recognized literary merit and write an essay in which you (a) briefly describe the standards of fictional society in which the character exists and (b) show how the character is affected by and responds to those standards. In your essay do not merely summarize the plot.

1971: The significance of a title such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is easy to discover. However in other works (for example, *Measure for Measure*) the full significance of the title becomes apparent to the reader only gradually. Choose two works of literature and show how the significance of their respective titles is developed through the author’s use of devices such as contrast, repetition, allusion, and point of view.

1972: In retrospect, the reader often discovers that the first chapter of a novel or the opening scene of a drama introduces some of the major themes of the work. Write and essay about the opening scene of a drama or the first chapter of a novel in which you explain how it functions in this way.

1973: An effective literary work does not merely stop or cease; it concludes. In the view of some critics, a work that does nor provide the pleasure of significant “closure” has terminated with an artistic fault. A satisfactory ending is not, however, always conclusive in every sense; significant closure may require the reader to abide with or adjust to ambiguity or uncertainty. Write an essay that discusses the ending of a novel or play of acknowledged literary merit. Explain precisely how and why the ending appropriately or inappropriately concludes the work. Do not merely summarize the work.

1974: Choose a work of literature written before 1900. Write an essay in which you present arguments for or against the work’s relevance to a person today. Your own position should emerge over the course of the essay. You may refer to works of literature written after 1900 for the purpose of contrast or comparison.

1975: Although literary critics have tended to praise the unique in literary characterization, many authors have employed the stereo-typed character successfully. Select one work of acknowledged literary merit and, in a well-written essay, show how the conventional or stereotyped character or characters function to achieve the author’s purpose.

1976: The conflict created when the will of an individual opposes the will of the majority is the recurring theme of many novels, plays, and essays. Select the work of an essayist who is in opposition to his or her society; or from a work of recognized literary merit, select a fictional character who is in opposition to his or her society. In a critical essay, analyze the conflict and discuss the moral and ethical implications for both the individual and society. Do not summarize the plot or the action of the work you choose.

1977: In some novels and plays certain parallel or recurring events prove to be significant. In an essay, describe the major similarities and differences in a sequence of parallel or recurring events in a novel or play and discuss the significance of such events. Do not merely summarize plot.

1978: Choose an implausible or strikingly unrealistic incident or character in a work of fiction or drama of recognized literary merit. Write an essay which explains the how the incident or character is related to the more realistic or plausible events in the rest of the work. Avoid plot summary.

1979: Choose a complex and important character in a novel or play of recognized literary merit who might – on the basis of the character’s actions alone – be considered evil or immoral. In a well-organized essay, explain both how and why the full presentation of the character in the work makes us react more sympathetically than we otherwise might. Avoid plot summary.

1980: A recurring theme in literature is “the classic war between passion and responsibility.” For instance, a personal cause, a love, a desire for revenge, a determination to redress a wrong, or some other emotion or drive may conflict with moral duty. Choose a literary work in which a character confronts the demands of a private passion that conflicts with his or her responsibilities. In a well-written essay show clearly the nature of the conflict, its effect upon the character, and its significance to the work.

1981: The meaning of some literary works is often enhanced by sustained allusion to myths, the Bible, or other works of literature. Select a literary work that makes use of such a sustained reference. Then write a well-organized essay in which you explain the allusion that predominates in the work and analyze how it enhances the work’s meaning.

1982: In great literature, no scene of violence exists for its own sake. Choose a work of literary merit that confronts the reader or audience with a scene or scenes of violence. In a well-organized essay, explain how the scene(s) contribute to the meaning of the complete work. Avoid plot summary.

1983: From a novel or play of literary merit, select an important character who is a villain. Then, in a well-organized essay, analyze the nature of the character’s villainy and show how it enhances the meaning of the work. Do not merely summarize the plot.

1984: Select a line or so of poetry, or a moment or scene in a novel, epic poem, or play that you find especially memorable. Write an essay in which you identify the line of the passage, explain its relationship to the work in which it is found, and analyze the reasons for its effectiveness.

1985: A critic has said that one important measure of a superior work of literature is its ability to produce in the reader a healthy confusion of pleasure and disquietude. Select a literary work that produces this “healthy confusion.” Write an essay in which you explain the source of the “pleasure and disquietude” experienced by the readers of the work.

1986: Some works of literature use the element of time in a distinct way. The chronological sequence of events may be altered, or time may be suspended or accelerated. Choose a novel, epic, or play of recognized literary merit and show how the author’s manipulation of time contributes to the effectiveness of the work as a whole.

1987: Some novels and plays seem to advocate changes in social or political attitudes or in traditions. Choose such a novel or play and note briefly the particular attitudes or traditions that the author apparently wishes to modify. Then analyze the techniques the author uses to influence the reader’s or the audience’s views.

1988: Choose a distinguished novel or play in which some of the most significant events are mental or psychological; for example, awakenings, discoveries, change in consciousness. In a well-organized essay, describe how the author manages to give these internal events the sense of excitement, suspense, and climax usually associated with external action.

1989: In questioning the value of literary realism, Flannery O’Conner has written, “ I am interested in making a good case for distortion because I am coming to believe that it is the only way to make people see.” Write an essay in which you make a good case for distortion as distinct from literary realism. Base your essay on a work that you know well. Analyze how important elements of the work you choose are distorted and explain how these distortions contribute to the effectiveness of the work.

1990: Choose a novel or play that depicts a conflict between a parent (or a parental figure) and a son or daughter. Write an essay in which you analyze the source of the conflict and explain how the conflict contributes to the meaning of the work as a whole.

1991: Many plays and novels use contrasting places (for example, two countries, two cities, two houses, or the land and the sea) to represent opposed forces or ideas that are central to the meaning of the work. Choose a novel or play that contrasts two such places. Write an essay explaining how the places differ, what each place represents, and how their contrast contributes to the meaning of the work as a whole.

1992:In a novel or play, a confidant (male) or confidante (female) is a character, often a friend or relative of a hero or heroine whose role is to be present when the hero or heroine needs a sympathetic listener to confide in. Frequently the result is, as Henry James, remarked, that the confidant or confidante can be as much “the reader’s friend as the protagonist’s.” However, the author sometimes uses this character for other purposes as well. Choose a confidant or confidante from a novel or play of recognized literary merit and write an essay in which you discuss the various ways the character functions in the work. Avoid mere plot summary.

1993: “The true test of comedy is that it shall awaken thoughtful laughter” – George Meredith. Choose a novel, play, or long poem in which a scene or character awakens “thoughtful laughter” in the reader. Write an essay in which you show why this laughter is “thoughtful” and how it contributes to the meaning of the work as a whole.

1994: In some works of literature, a character who appears briefly, or does not appear at all, is a significant presence. Choose a novel or play of literary merit and write an essay in which you show how such a character functions in the work. You may wish to discuss how the character affects action, theme, or the development of other characters.

1997: Novels and plays often include scenes of weddings, funerals, parties, and other social occasions. Such scenes may reveal the values of the characters and the society in which they live. Select a novel or play that includes such a scene and in a focused essay, discuss the contribution the scene makes to the meaning of the work as a whole.

1998: In his essay “Walking,” Henry David Thoreau offers the following assessment of literature:

“In literature it is only the wild that attracts us. Dullness is bu another name for tameness. It is the uncivilized free and wild thinking in *Hamlet* and *The Illiad*, in all scriptures and mythologies, not learned in schools, that delights us.”

From the works of literature you have studied in school, choose a novel, play, or epic poem that you may initially have thought was conventional and tame but that you now value for its “uncivilized free and wild thinking.” Write an essay in which you explain what constitutes its “uncivilized free and wild thinking” and how that thinking is central to the value of the work as a whole. Support your ideas with specific references to the wok you choose.

2001: One definition of madness is “mental delusion or the eccentric behavior resulting from it.” But Emily Dickinson wrote

Much madness is divinest Sense –

To a discerning Eye –

Novelists and playwrights have often seen madness with a “discerning Eye.” Select a novel or play in which a character’s apparent madness or irrational behavior plays an important role. Then write a well-organized essay in which you explain what the delusion or eccentric behavior consists of and how it might be judged reasonable. Explain the significance of the “madness” to the work as a whole. Do not merely summarize the plot.

2002: Morally ambiguous characters – characters whose behavior discourages readers from identifying them as purely evil or purely good – are at the heart of many works of literature. Choose a novel or play in which a morally ambiguous character plays a pivotal role. Then write an essay in which you explain how the character can be viewed as morally ambiguous and why his or her moral ambiguity is significant to the work as a whole.

2003: According to critic Northrop Frye, “Tragic heroes are so much the highest points in their human landscape that they seem inevitable conductors of the power about them, great trees more likely to be struck by lightning than a clump of grass. Conductors may of course be instruments as well as victims of the divine lightning.” Select a novel or play in which a tragic figure functions as an instrument of the suffering. Then write an essay in which you explain how the suffering brought upon others by that figure contributes to the tragic vision of the work as a whole.

2004: Critic Roland Barthes has said, “Literature is the question minus the answer.” Choose a novel or play and, considering Barthes’ observation, write an essay in which you analyze a central question the work raises and the extent to which it offers any answers. Explain how the author’s treatment of this question affects your understanding of the work as a whole. Avoid mere plot summary.

2005: In Kate Chopin’s The Awakening (1899), protagonist Edna Pontellier is said to possess “that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions.” In a novel or play that you have studied, identify a character who conforms outwardly while questioning inwardly. Then write an essay in which you analyze how this tension between outward conformity and inward questioning contributes to the meaning of the work as a whole. Avoid mere plot summary.

2006: Many writers use a country setting to establish values within a work of literature. For example, the country may be a place of virtue and peace, or one of primitivism and ignorance. Choose a novel or play in which such a setting plays a significant role. Then write an essay in which you analyze how the country setting functions in the work as a whole. Do not merely summarize the plot.

2007: In many works of literature, past events can affect, positively or negatively, the present actions, attitudes, or values of a character. Choose a novel or play in which a character must contend with some aspect of the past, either personal or societal. Then write an essay in which you show how the character’s relationship to the past contributes to the meaning of the work as a whole.

**2008.** In a literary work, a minor character, often known as a foil, possesses traits that emphasize, by contrast or comparison, the distinctive characteristics and qualities of the main character. For example, the ideas or behavior of a minor character might be used to highlight the weaknesses or strengths of the main character. Choose a novel or play in which a minor character serves as a foil for the main character. Then write an essay in which you analyze how the relation between the minor character and the major character illuminates the meaning of the work.

**2008, Form B.** In some works of literature, childhood and adolescence are portrayed as times graced by innocence and a sense of wonder; in other works, they are depicted as times of tribulation and terror. Focusing on a single novel or play, explain how its representation of childhood or adolescence shapes the meaning of the work as a whole.

**2009.** A symbol is an object, action, or event that represents something or that creates a range of associations beyond itself. In literary works a symbol can express an idea, clarify meaning, or enlarge literal meaning. Select a novel or play and, focusing on one symbol, write an essay analyzing how that symbol functions in the work and what it reveals about the characters or themes of the work as a whole. Do not merely summarize the plot.

**2009, Form B.** Many works of literature deal with political or social issues. Choose a novel or play that focuses on a political oe social issue. Then write an essay in which you analyze how the author uses literary elements to explore this issue and explain how the issue contributes to the meaning of the work as a whole. Do not merely summarize the plot.

**2010.** Palestinian American literary theorist and cultural critic Edward Said has written that “Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted.” Yet Said has also said that exile can become “a potent, even enriching” experience. Select a novel, play, or epic in which a character experiences such a rift and becomes cut off from “home,” whether that home is the character’s birthplace, family, homeland, or other special place. Then write an essay in which you analyze how the character’s experience with exile is both alienating and enriching, and how this experience illuminates the meaning of the work as a whole. Do not merely summarize the plot.

**2010, Form B.** “You can leave home all you want but home will never leave you.” -- Sonsyrea Tate

Sonsyrea Tate’s statement suggests that “home” may be conceived of as a dwelling, a place, or a state of mind. It may have positive or negative associations, but in either case, it may have a considerable influence on an individual. Choose a novel or play in which a central character leaves home, yet finds that home remains significant. Write a well-developed essay in which you analyze the importance of “home” to this character and the reasons for its continuing influence. Explain how the character’s idea of home illuminates the larger meaning of the work. Do not merely summarize the plot.

**2011.** In a novel by William Styron, a father tells his son that life “is a search for justice.” Choose a character from a novel or play who responds in some significant way to justice or injustice. Then write a well-developed essay in which you analyze the character’s understanding of justice, the degree to which the character’s search for justice is successful , and the significance of this search for the work as a whole.

**2011, Form B.** In *The Writing of Fiction* (1925), novelist Edith Wharton states the following:

At every stage in the progress of his tale the novelist must rely on what may be called the illuminating incident to reveal and emphasize the inner meaning of each situation. Illuminating incidents are the magic casements of fiction, its vistas on infinity.

Choose a novel or play that you have studied and write a well-organized essay in which you describe an “illuminating” episode or moment and explain how it functions as a “casement,” a window that opens onto the meaning of the work as a whole. Avoid mere plot summary.

**2012.** “And after all, our surroundings influence our lives and characters as much as fate, destiny or any supernatural agency.” Pauline Hopkins, *Contending Forces*

Choose a novel or play in which cultural, physical, or geographical surroundings shape psychological or moral traits in a character. Then write a well-organized essay in which you analyze how surroundings affect this character and illuminate the meaning of the work as a whole. Avoid mere plot summary.