

ENGLISH LITERATURE AND COMPOSITION

SECTION II

Total Time—2 hours

Question 1

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

1. Read the following poem carefully, paying particular attention to the physical intensity of the language. Then write a well-organized essay in which you explain how the poet conveys not just a literal description of picking blackberries but a deeper understanding of the whole experience. You may wish to include analysis of such elements as diction, imagery, metaphor, rhyme, rhythm, and form.

Blackberry-Picking

Late August, given heavy rain and sun
For a full week, the blackberries would ripen.
At first, just one, a glossy purple clot
Line Among others, red, green, hard as a knot.
(5) You ate that first one and its flesh was sweet
Like thickened wine: summer's blood was in it
Leaving stains upon the tongue and lust for
Picking. Then red ones inked up and that hunger
Sent us out with milk cans, pea tins, jam pots
(10) Where briars scratched and wet grass bleached our boots.
Round hayfields, cornfields and potato drills¹
We trekked and picked until the cans were full,
Until the tinkling bottom had been covered
With green ones, and on top big dark blobs burned
(15) Like a plate of eyes. Our hands were peppered
With thorn pricks, our palms sticky as Bluebeard's.²

We hoarded the fresh berries in the byre.³
But when the bath was filled we found a fur,
A rat-grey fungus, glutting on our cache.
(20) The juice was stinking too. Once off the bush
The fruit fermented, the sweet flesh would turn sour.
I always felt like crying. It wasn't fair
That all the lovely canfuls smelt of rot.
Each year I hoped they'd keep, knew they would not.

—Seamus Heaney

"Blackberry-Picking" from *SELECTED POEMS*
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¹ Planted rows

² Bluebeard is a character in a fairy tale who murders his wives

³ Barn

Section II: Free Response

On the next several pages, you will find a general analysis of each question, and the students' performance on it, by the Chief Faculty Consultant, Linda Hubert. Following these are the scoring guidelines used by the faculty consultants at the AP Reading. There are also sample student responses for each question, along with commentary indicating why the essay received the score it did. A distribution of student scores on each free-response question appears on page 71.

Question 1 — Overview

This question required students to read the 24-line poem “Blackberry-Picking” by contemporary Irish poet Seamus Heaney, “paying particular attention to the physical intensity of the language.” In the well-organized essay they were asked to write, they were charged to explain “how the poet conveys not just a literal description of picking blackberries but a deeper understanding of the whole experience.” Students were prompted to include, should they wish, an analysis of any of the following elements: diction, imagery, metaphor, rhyme, rhythm, and form.

This fine poem by a first-rate poet was a pleasing text, apparently, to both the seasoned teachers who scored the essays and to their young charges who wrote them. No one faulted this selection, except perhaps to remark that the AP English Development Committee, with its poem by Eavan Boland last year and with the one this year by Heaney, had suddenly “gone Irish.” “Blackberry-Picking” proved more immediately accessible to students than last year’s poem by Boland (or indeed many others that we have provided in past exams), and its appeal seemed to transcend nationality, gender, race, and age. Almost all students were able to describe the situation of the poem and to understand at some level the speaker’s response to the quickly deteriorating stash of berries. They seemed to enjoy the vividness of the poem’s language, even if they overlooked much of its suggestiveness.

There were numerous examples of student achievement on this question: superior students could work effectively with the literal and metaphoric dimensions of the poem without losing sight of their interconnection — without flattening the poem or diminishing its richness. Competent students of poetry recognized the

defining perspective of youth versus adulthood as they took note that the poet works through the memory of the man to reconstruct and assess his boyhood experiences with blackberry picking. Some wrote of the rural ritual of blackberry picking as it patterned the cycles of the seasons; they conveyed with aptly chosen specific detail how the strong, evocative language underscored the speaker’s youthful exuberance and greed. Some few saw implicit in the boyhood excess the genesis of the older speaker’s disappointment and despair.

However, for many if not most students, the ability to probe the connection between the all but sinister description of the fragility of the berries and the speaker’s annual encounter with life’s transience was limited. Too few went so far as to link the speaker’s deepening recognition of the inevitable decay of the berries with the implied defeat of grasping, greedy youthful optimism. Nor did they develop an extended discussion of the mature speaker’s understanding of mortality by building on the language of the first stanza as well as the second.

Regardless of the list of suggestions for analysis, we were disappointed by the capacity of the preponderance of student writers to define and discuss the artistic strategies through which Heaney created and conveyed meaning. The prompt asked for “how,” but some students ignored this direction altogether. Many of the dutiful essays that sought to give us the “how” plodded through a discussion of the elements on the accompanying list without shaping a coherent and insightful argument. Indeed the list in the prompt seemed to provoke superficial commentary and even tedious similarities among the essays. The same observations — often in essentially the same order — appeared in essay after essay. However, very few students seemed aware of the technical virtuosity of the poem. Most failed to notice (or to venture to explain) its subtle repetitions of sound and its reliance on consonance, assonance, and off rhyme rather than the conventional masculine rhymes that might have been expected to bring closure to its iambic pentameter couplets.

Although the merits of a list of suggested works remain controversial, teachers often convey their relief that such a list supplies support to students by helping to provoke their own thinking.

Clearly English teachers have their work cut out for them. Students wrenched the poem artificially askew

and failed to underscore the power of the poem's rich language to contain multiple meanings and to resonate with even more. Perhaps the prompt might have *stressed* the inherent relationship between the literal and metaphoric — and avoided the words “deeper understanding” altogether. Unfortunately, the problem goes deeper than the prompt to this one question. Almost despite the careful choice of texts for the poetry question year in and year out, the poetry essay continues to present the most difficulty for students. Certainly, a healthy representation of students dazzles us with their sensitivity and insight. But many more seem for the most part intimidated by poetry: they sometimes strain so hard at “cracking a code” that their essays prove reductive or convoluted. Though unusual this year, total misreadings have not been uncommon in previous years.

As we acknowledge the relatively low scores earned by students from year to year on this essay question (and indeed the occasional inconsistencies of these scores when compared with those on the rest of the test), we try to remember the difficulty of tasking students to read and write about a provocative poem in a limited time period.

It is important to remember that no paper on a poem is without flaws of omission if not commission: imprecisions or infelicities in diction, mistakes in grammar or spelling, an abortive ending, an interpretation that is unpersuasive or even peculiar, or limited development where we might hope for more. To write about poetry, it seems, you have to be a little something of a poet yourself — or at least empowered by fine teaching to tap the poetic spirit that exists at some level within us all. In the 40 minutes available to write their poetry essays, certain students manage only to convey their confusion, their plodding literalness in reading a poem, or even their desultory, unhinged renderings that are not so much creative as unconvincing. The language in the essays of others, of course, takes wings. That our young people do as well as they do within the short length of time they are given to read, study, and write is perhaps no minor miracle.

The three student responses on pages 39-48 are arranged with the strongest first, the next strongest second, and the passable but undistinguished essay third.

Scoring Guidelines for Question 1

General directions for faculty consultants: * This scoring guide will be useful for most of the essays that you read, but in problematic cases, please consult your Table Leader. The score you assign should reflect your judgment of the quality of the essay *as a whole*. Reward the writers for what they do well. The score for an exceptionally well-written essay may be raised by one point from the score otherwise appropriate. In no case may a poorly written essay be scored higher than 3.

9-8 These well-conceived and well-ordered essays provide insightful analysis (implicit as well as explicit) of *how* Heaney creates and conveys his memory of picking blackberries. They appreciate Heaney's physically-intense language for its vivid literal description, but they also understand the meaning of the experience on a profound, metaphoric level. Although the writers of these essays may offer a range of interpretations and/or choose different poetic elements for emphasis, these papers provide convincing readings of the poem and maintain consistent control over the elements of effective composition, including the language unique to the criticism of verse. Their textual references are apt and specific. Though they may not be error-free, they demonstrate the writers' ability to read poetry perceptively and to write with clarity and sophistication.

7-6 These essays reflect a sound grasp of Heaney's poem and the power of its language; but they prove less sensitive than the best essays to the poetic ways that Heaney invests literal experience with strong, metaphoric implications. The interpretations of the poem that they provide may falter in some particulars or they may be less thorough or precise in their discussion of *how* the speaker reveals the experience of “blackberry-picking.” Nonetheless, their dependence on paraphrase, if any, will be in the service of analysis. These essays demonstrate the writers' ability to express ideas clearly, but they do not exhibit the same level of mastery, maturity, and/or control as the very best essays. These essays are likely to be briefer, less incisive, and less well-supported than the 9-8 papers.

*These directions apply to the scoring guidelines for every question.

5 These essays are, at best, superficial. They respond to the assigned task yet probably say little beyond the most easily grasped observations. Their analysis of how the experience of blackberry picking is conveyed may be vague, formulaic, or inadequately supported. They may suffer from the cumulative force of many minor misreadings. They tend to rely on paraphrase but nonetheless paraphrase which contains some implicit analysis. Composition skills are at a level sufficient to convey the writer's thoughts, and egregious mechanical errors do not constitute a distraction. These essays are nonetheless not as well-conceived, organized, or developed as upper-half papers.

4-3 These lower-half essays reveal an incomplete understanding of the poem and perhaps an insufficient understanding of the prescribed task as well: they may emphasize literal description without discussing the deeper implications of the blackberry-picking experience. The analysis may be partial, unconvincing, or irrelevant — or it may

rely essentially on paraphrase. Evidence from the text may be meager or misconstrued. The writing demonstrates uncertain control over the elements of composition, often exhibiting recurrent stylistic flaws and/or inadequate development of ideas. Essays scored 3 may contain significant misreading and/or unusually inept writing.

2-1 These essays compound the weaknesses of the papers in the 4-3 range. They may seriously misread the poem. Frequently, they are unacceptably brief. They are poorly written on several counts and may contain many distracting errors in grammar and mechanics. Although some attempt may have been made to respond to the question, the writer's assertions are presented with little clarity, organization, or support from the text of the poem.

0 A response with no more than a reference to the task.

— A blank paper or completely off-topic response.

Sample Student Responses for Question 1

Student Response 1 — Excellent

In Seamus Heaney's poem "Blackberry-picking," the use of juicy diction, clear and vivid imagery, slant rhyme and conversational rhythm, along with casual form, illustrate the poet's message that the childhood experience of picking berries holds a deeper metaphor for life; that is, childish hopes continue to exist despite the ^{also} continual slap of reality.

The casual and childish hopefulness in the poem is clearly embodied in the conversational tone, forced by the irregular sentence structure found within the rhythm, and the slant rhyme usage throughout the work. By organizing sentences in such a way that perpetuates variance of stressed and unstressed syllables, the narrative tale of berry-picking is seen in a casual light. The additional use of slant rhyme or off rhyme ("sweet/it" 5-6) also adds to the elimination of the sing-song feel that so often cause distraction of the reader in other poems. The poem's form in an AAB... rhyme scheme separated into almost rhyming couplets keeps a sense of organized structure throughout.

The use of descriptive, content-filled diction is as juicy as the blackberries in the story; this description adds

not only to the literal childish experience of berry-picking, but also to the adult acknowledgement of the significance of the experience. The clear imagery of the berries' "flesh" (5) sweetened "like thickened wine" (6) brings vivid images and striking comparisons between the berry flesh and human flesh, filled with "summer's blood" (6). The fact that the memory of the adult, reflecting back upon the childhood experience is so strong as to remember all of the "milk cans; pea tins, [and] jam pots" (9) provides an additional link through repetitive diction to the metaphor that is to come. Imagery is also solidified through such literary elements as consonance "tricked and picked" (12) alliteration "big dark blobs buried" (14), and personification as it is "hunger" (8) that sent the children out to gather all of the berries.

Through the childhood experience of gathering berries, the speaker uses literary elements to show the deeper metaphor for idealistic hope and its survival despite realistic confinements. The structure of the poem, by separating the initial tale of the berry picking into 8 couplets and the reflection upon the fermentation and rot into four couplets indicates the

speaker's belief that the childish, innocent hope for sweetness and goodness continues on. This is paradoxically established further in the speaker's description of "all the lovely canfuls smelt of rot" (13) as the hopes of sweet, luscious blackberries are destroyed by the inevitable natural decay of what was sweet and good in the berries. This grim picture, of the natural decay and destruction of the things we cherish enough to go search after even "where briars scratched" (10) and when "our hands were peppered / with thorn pricks" (15-16), presents a depressing image of the world around us. We sacrifice for the "lust for / picking" (7-8) and are yet denied the fruits of our labor. This destruction of what people materialistically search for, however, does offer hope. Although the human possessions do not keep forever, the hope that nature's goodness will continue on is ~~present~~ mirrored in the childish hope that the berries will keep despite the knowledge that the berries themselves will rot. More important than actually saving the berries then, is the value placed on nature and the triumph in the berry-pick. The fact that the berries were picked every year despite the knowledge that they would spoil is the finishing

Student Response 1, continued

touch on the role that hope has in our society.

The ideals of natural preservation, although tainted by inevitable decay of what is worked for, are perpetuated not by the physical salvation of nature's goods, but by the internal value that is placed on nature. In "Blackberry-Picking" the adult reflection upon the childhood innocence of that hope is reflected poignantly by the lush descriptions and imagery of a memory that in some way, ~~is~~ true to us all.

Commentary on Essay

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!

Student Response 2 — Good

In Keats' poem "Blackberry-Picking" a deeper ~~and~~ understanding of life's ceaseless cycles is conveyed as the poem shifts from lustful and unsatisfied to disappointed and destitute. The poem was divided into two sections. The first one physically described the fall's harvest of ~~B~~ blackberries while it symbolically described life. The vigor and youthful air given to the poem was inherent through the poet's diction. The blackberries were vividly described using strong visual, and tactile images such as "glossy purple clot", (3) "red, green, hard as a knot" (4) and "big dark blobs burned" (14). The ~~re~~ repetition of 'b's' in line 14 further emphasizes the importance of the chosen words, ~~it~~ strengthens the language. The ~~in~~ lustfulness ~~lustfulness~~ of the poem was portrayed through similes and metaphors. ~~It~~ Phrases such as "its flesh was sweet / Like thickened wine: summer's blood was in it" (lines 5-6) make references to a physical body, the words 'flesh' and 'blood' in particular. The simile "like thickened wine" draws images of drunkenness, almost an irresistible force creating a "lust for Picking" (lines 7-8). The tone of the poem remains unsatisfied.

Student Response 2, continued

The second section of the poem physically describes the decay of the blackberries, yet symbolically ~~describes~~ stands as an elaboration of death. The ~~secon~~ eighteenth line insinuates a surplus, "when the bath was filled". Strong visual descriptions of the decay were used such as "rat-grey fungus" (19) and ~~an~~ olfactory ^{images} with "stinking" (20) and "lovely canfuls smelt of rot" (23). The poet "always felt like crying" (12) and "hoped they'd keep, knew they would not" (24). He was trying to defy life's natural cycles while knowing he was powerless against them. The poem's second half was disappointing, destitute and full of false hope. The overall contrast between ^{the} life and death of the blackberries, with the poet's powerlessness over natural cycles are what combine to convey a deeper understanding of the whole experience. A powerful, rhyming comparison was drawn through the witty "clot" (3) and "knot" (4) at the end of those lines, and the words "rot" (23) and "not" (24) at the end of the last two

Student Response 2, continued

lines. 'Rot' and 'not' are strong negative influences on the poem, whereas 'clot' and 'knot' are positive influences. A sharp contrast is drawn, further emphasizing and strengthening the overall understanding portrayed in the poem.

Commentary on Essay

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 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.

Seamus Heaney's poem "Blackberry - Picking" conveys more than just a literal description of the process of harvesting blackberries. Through the form and structure of the poem, and through the author's choice of words and metaphors a ~~more~~ ~~deeper~~ deeper explanation of the experience is attained. The process of blackberry harvesting is ~~shown as a~~ ~~process of~~ ~~love and loss~~ shown as a deep psychological process of love and loss.

The poem is divided into two sections. This division separates the feelings of love in the first part from the feelings of loss in the second part. The poem describes the process of picking the blackberries in the first stanza. This is the longer of the two stanzas, illustrating the long, labor intensive harvest driven by love. The second stanza is about the fermentation of the blackberries soon after picking them. This stanza is short because the berries rot quickly after they have been picked. This poem structure contrasts the long labors of love ~~and~~ and the short time in which all can be lost.

The diction in the poem also contributes to its deeper meaning. While the author describes the picking, he uses certain words and phrases which demonstrate the love of blackberry harvesting. "Like thickened wine: summer's blood was in it /

Student Response 3, continued

Leaving stains upon the tongue and lust for Picking" (lines 6-8). This statement describes the joy and fulfillment the author finds through ~~the~~ the picking, because of the use of the words "lust", and "thickened wine". The diction in the second stanza changes to show the loss felt when the berries ferment. Words such as "glutting" (line 19) and "shrinking" (line 20), and the phrase, "I always felt like crying" (line 22) show this sad tone. The ^{change of the} author's words and phrases between the first and second stanza once again convey a the deeper psychological feelings associated with picking black berries.

Finally, the metaphors of the poem also show the love and loss of the process. The author describes the taste of the first berry as "sweet like thickened wine" (lines 5-6). This metaphor is a clear statement of the love involved through the description of the taste. The loss involved is once again portrayed in the second stanza, through metaphors. The author ~~says~~ compares the moldy blackberries to "rat-grey fungus" (line 19). This comparison ~~now shows~~ shows the once delicious, wonderful berries, have been ruined.

Student Response 3, continued

The poem portrays blackberry-picking as more than just a simple labor. It ~~is~~ a deeper experience of love and anticipation followed by sadness and a ~~feeling~~ sense of loss.

Commentary on Essay

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.