

**MsEffie's List
of Poetry Essay Prompts
for Advanced Placement® English
Literature Exams, 1970-2019***

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Each poem is included in the following prompts, printed on separate pages for better use in the classroom. None of the prompts are original to me, but are Advanced Placement® English Literature and Composition Exam prompts. This is my best effort to comply with College Board's use requirements.

1970 Poem: "Elegy for Jane" (Theodore Roethke)

Prompt: Write an essay in which you describe the speaker's attitude toward his former student, Jane.

Elegy for Jane by Theodore Roethke

I remember the neckcurls, limp and damp as tendrils;
And her quick look, a sidelong pickerel smile;
And how, once startled into talk, the light syllables leaped for her,
And she balanced in the delight of her thought,

5 A wren, happy, tail into the wind,
Her song trembling the twigs and small branches.
The shade sang with her;
The leaves, their whispers turned to kissing,
And the mould sang in the bleached valleys under the rose.

10 Oh, when she was sad, she cast herself down into such a pure depth,
Even a father could not find her:
Scraping her cheek against straw,
Stirring the clearest water.

15 My sparrow, you are not here,
Waiting like a fern, making a spiney shadow.
The sides of wet stones cannot console me,
Nor the moss, wound with the last light.

20 If only I could nudge you from this sleep,
My maimed darling, my skittery pigeon.
Over this damp grave I speak the words of my love:
I, with no rights in this matter,
Neither father nor lover.

1971 Poem: "The Unknown Citizen" (W.H. Auden)

Prompt: In a brief essay, identify at least two of the implications implicit in the society reflected in the poem. Support your statements by specific references to the poem.

The Unknown Citizen by W.H. Auden

He was found by the Bureau of Statistics to be
One against whom there was no official complaint,
And all the reports on his conduct agree
That, in the modern sense of an old-fashioned word, he was a saint,
5 For in everything he did he served the Greater Community.
Except for the War till the day he retired
He worked in a factory and never got fired,
But satisfied his employers, Fudge Motors Inc.
Yet he wasn't a scab or odd in his views,
10 For his Union reports that he paid his dues,
(Our report on his Union shows it was sound)
And our Social Psychology workers found
That he was popular with his mates and liked a drink.
The Press are convinced that he bought a paper every day
15 And that his reactions to advertisements were normal in every way.
Policies taken out in his name prove that he was fully insured,
And his Health-card shows he was once in hospital but left it cured.
Both Producers Research and High-Grade Living declare
He was fully sensible to the advantages of the Installment Plan
20 And had everything necessary to the Modern Man,
A phonograph, a radio, a car and a frigidaire.
Our researchers into Public Opinion are content
That he held the proper opinions for the time of year;
When there was peace, he was for peace; when there was war, he went.
25 He was married and added five children to the population,
Which our Eugenist says was the right number for a parent of his generation.
And our teachers report that he never interfered with their education.
Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd:
Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard.

1976 Poem: "Poetry of Departures" (Philip Larkin)

Prompt: Write an essay in which you discuss how the poem's diction (choice of words) reveals his attitude toward the two ways of living mentioned in the poem.

Poetry Of Departures by Philip Larkin

Sometimes you hear, fifth-hand,
As epitaph:
He chucked up everything
And just cleared off,
5 And always the voice will sound
Certain you approve
This audacious, purifying,
Elemental move.

10 And they are right, I think.
We all hate home
And having to be there:
I detest my room,
It's specially-chosen junk,
15 The good books, the good bed,
And my life, in perfect order:
So to hear it said

He walked out on the whole crowd
Leaves me flushed and stirred,
Like *Then she undid her dress*
20 Or *Take that you bastard;*
Surely I can, if he did?
And that helps me to stay
Sober and industrious.
But I'd go today,

25 Yes, swagger the nut-strewn roads,
Crouch in the fo'c'sle
Stubbly with goodness, if
It weren't so artificial,
Such a deliberate step backwards
30 To create an object:
Books; china; a life
Reprehensibly perfect.

1977 Poem: "Piano" [2 poems with the same name] (D. H. Lawrence)

Prompt: Read both poems carefully and then write an essay in which you explain what characteristics of the second poem make it better than the first. Refer specifically to details of both poems.

(1) Piano by D. H. Lawrence

Somewhere beneath that piano's superb sleek black
Must hide my mother's piano, little and brown, with the back
That stood close to the wall, and the front's faded silk both torn,
And the keys with little hollows, that my mother's fingers had worn.
5 Softly, in the shadows, a woman is singing to me
Quietly, through the years I have crept back to see
A child sitting under the piano, in the boom of the shaking strings
Pressing the little poised feet of the mother who smiles as she sings.
10 The full throated woman has chosen a winning, living song
And surely the heart that is in me must belong
To the old Sunday evenings, when darkness wandered outside
And hymns gleamed on our warm lips, as we watched mother's fingers glide.

Or this is my sister at home in the old front room
Singing love's first surprised gladness, alone in the gloom.
15 She will start when she sees me, and blushing, spread out her hands
To cover my mouth's raillery, till I'm bound in her shame's heart-spun bands.

A woman is singing me a wild Hungarian air
And her arms, and her bosom, and the whole of her soul is bare, -
And the great black piano is clamouring as my mother's never could clamour
20 And my mother's tunes are devoured of this music's ravaging glamour.

(2) Piano by D. H. Lawrence

Softly, in the dusk, a woman is singing to me;
Taking me back down the vista of years, till I see
A child sitting under the piano, in the boom of the tingling strings
And pressing the small, poised feet of a mother who smiles as she sings.

5 In spite of myself, the insidious mastery of song
Betrays me back, till the heart of me weeps to belong
to the old Sunday evenings at home, with the winter outside
And hymns in the cosy parlour, the tinkling piano our guide.

10 So now it is vain for the singer to burst into clamour
With the great black piano appassionato. The glamour
Of childish days is upon me, my manhood is cast
Down in the flood of remembrance, I weep like a child for the past.

1978 Poem: "Law Like Love" (W.H. Auden)

Prompt: Read the poem and then write an essay discussing the differences between the conceptions of "law" in lines 1-34 and those in lines 35-60.

Law Like Love by W. H. Auden

Law, say the gardeners, is the sun, Law is the one All gardeners obey To-morrow, yesterday, to-day.	And always the loud angry crowd Very angry and very loud, Law is We, And always the soft idiot softly Me.
5 Law is the wisdom of the old, The impotent grandfathers feebly scold; The grandchildren put out a treble tongue, Law is the senses of the young.	35 If we, dear, know we know no more Than they about the Law, If I no more than you Know what we should and should not do Except that all agree
Law, says the priest with a priestly look, 10 Expounding to an unpriestly people, Law is the words in my priestly book, Law is my pulpit and my steeple. Law, says the judge as he looks down his nose, Speaking clearly and most severely,	40 Gladly or miserably That the Law is And that all know this If therefore thinking it absurd To identify Law with some other word,
15 Law is as I've told you before, Law is as you know I suppose, Law is but let me explain it once more, Law is The Law.	45 Unlike so many men I cannot say Law is again, No more than they can we suppress The universal wish to guess Or slip out of our own position
Yet law-abiding scholars write: 20 Law is neither wrong nor right, Law is only crimes Punished by places and by times, Law is the clothes men wear Anytime, anywhere,	50 Into an unconcerned condition. Although I can at least confine Your vanity and mine To stating timidly A timid similarity,
25 Law is Good morning and Good night.	55 We shall boast anyway: Like love I say.
Others say, Law is our Fate; Others say, Law is our State; Others say, others say Law is no more,	Like love we don't know where or why, Like love we can't compel or fly, Like love we often weep,
30 Law has gone away.	60 Like love we seldom keep.

1979 Poems: “Spring And All” (William Carlos Williams) and “For Jane Meyers” (Louise Gluck)

Prompt: Read the two poems carefully. Then write a well-organized essay in which you show how the attitudes towards the coming of spring implied in these two poems differ from each other. Support your statements with specific references to the texts.

Spring and All by William Carlos Williams

By the road to the contagious hospital
under the surge of the blue
mottled clouds driven from the
northeast—a cold wind. Beyond, the
5 waste of broad, muddy fields
brown with dried weeds, standing and fallen

patches of standing water
the scattering of tall trees

All along the road the reddish
10 purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy
stuff of bushes and small trees
with dead, brown leaves under them
leafless vines—

Lifeless in appearance, sluggish
15 dazed spring approaches—

They enter the new world naked,
cold, uncertain of all
save that they enter. All about them
the cold, familiar wind—

20 Now the grass, tomorrow
the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf
One by one the objects are defined—
It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf

But now the stark dignity of
25 entrance—Still, the profound change
has come upon them: rooted they
grip down and begin to awaken

For Jane Meyers by Louise Gluck

Sap rises from the sodden ditch
glues two green ears to the dead
birch twig. Perilous beauty—
and already Jane is digging out
5 her colored tennis shoes,
one mauve, one yellow, like large crocuses.

And by the laundromat
the Bartletts In their tidy yard—

as though it were not -
10 wearying, wearying

to hear in the bushes
the mild harping of the breeze,
the daffodils flocking and honking—

Look how the bluet* falls apart, mud
15 pockets the seed.
Months, years, then the dull blade of the wind.
It is spring I We are going to die I

And now April raises up her plaque of flowers
and the heart
20 expands to admit Its adversary.

*bluet: a wild flower with bluish blossoms

1980 Poem "One Art" (Elizabeth Bishop)

Prompt: Write an essay in which you describe how the speaker's attitude toward loss in lines 16-19 is related to her attitude toward loss in lines 1-15. Using specific references to the text, show how verse form and language contribute to the reader's understanding of these attitudes.

One Art by Elizabeth Bishop

The art of losing isn't hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

5 Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:
places, and names, and where it was you meant
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

10 I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

15 I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

---Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (Write it!) like disaster.

1981 Poem: "Storm Warnings" (Adrienne Rich)

Prompt: Write an essay in which you explain how the organization of the poem and the use of concrete details reveal both its literal and its metaphorical meanings. In your discussion, show how both of these meanings relate to the title.

Storm Warnings by Adrienne Rich

The glass has been falling all the afternoon,
And knowing better than the instrument
What winds are walking overhead, what zone
Of gray unrest is moving across the land,
5 I leave the book on a pillowed chair
And walk from window to closed window, watching
Boughs strain against the sky

And think again, as often when the air
`Moves inward toward a silent core of waiting,
10 How with a single purpose time has traveled
By secret currents of the undiscerned
`Into this polar realm. Weather abroad
And weather in the heart alike come on
Regardless of prediction.

15 Between foreseeing and averting change
Lies all the mastery of elements
Which clocks and weatherglasses cannot alter.
Time in the hand is not control of time,
Nor shattered fragments of an instrument
20 A proof against the wind; the wind will rise,
We can only close the shutters.

I draw the curtains as the sky goes black
And set a match to candles sheathed in glass
Against the keyhole draught, the insistent whine
25 Of weather through the unsealed aperture.
This is our sole defense against the season;
These are the things that we have learned to do
Who live in troubled regions.

1982 Poem: "The Groundhog" (Richard Eberhart)

Prompt: Write an essay in which you analyze how the language of the poem reflects the changing perceptions and emotions of the speaker as he considers the metamorphosis of the dead groundhog. Develop your essay with specific references to the text of the poem.

The Groundhog by Richard Eberhart

In June, amid the golden fields,
I saw a groundhog lying dead.
Dead lay he; my senses shook,
and mind outshot our naked frailty.
5 There lowly in the vigorous summer
His form began its senseless change,
And made my senses waver dim
Seeing nature ferocious in him.
Inspecting close his maggots' might
10 And seething cauldron of his being,
Half with loathing, half with a strange love,
I poked him with an angry stick.
The fever arose, became a flame
And Vigour circumscribed the skies,
15 Immense energy in the sun,
And through my frame a sunless trembling.
My stick had done nor good nor harm.
Then stood I silent in the day
Watching the object, as before;
20 And kept my reverence for knowledge
Trying for control, to be still,
To quell the passion of the blood;
Until I had bent down on my knees
Praying for joy in the sight of decay.
25 And so I left; and I returned
In Autumn strict of eye, to see
The sap gone out of the groundhog,
But the bony sodden hulk remained.
But the year had lost its meaning,
30 And in intellectual chains
I lost both love and loathing,
Mured up in the wall of wisdom.
Another summer took the fields again
Massive and burning, full of life,
35 But when I chanced upon the spot
There was only a little hair left,
And bones bleaching in the sunlight
Beautiful as architecture;
I watched them like a geometer,
40 And cut a walking stick from a birch.
It has been three years, now.
There is no sign of the groundhog.
I stood there in the whirling summer,
My hand capped a withered heart,
45 And thought of China and of Greece,
Of Alexander in his tent;
Of Montaigne in his tower,
Of Saint Theresa in her wild lament.

1983 Poem: "Clocks and Lovers" (W.H. Auden)

Prompt: Write a well-organized essay in which you contrast the attitude of the clocks with that of the lover. Through careful analysis of the language and imagery, show how this contrast is important to the meaning of the poem.

Clocks and Lovers by W. H. Auden

As I walked out one evening,
Walking down Bristol Street,
The crowds upon the pavement
Were fields of harvest wheat.

(5) And down by the brimming river
I heard a lover sing
Under an arch of the railway;
"Love has no ending.

I'll love you, dear, I'll love you
(10) Till China and Africa meet,
And the river jumps over the mountain
And the salmon sing in the street.

I'll love you till the ocean
Is folded and hung up to dry,
(15) And the seven stars go squawking
Like geese about the sky.

The years shall run like rabbits,
For in my arms I hold
The Flower of the Ages,
(20) And the first love of the world."

But all the clocks in the city
Began to whirr and chime:
"O let not Time deceive you,
You cannot conquer Time.

(25) In the burrows of the Nightmare
Where Justice naked is,
Time watches from the shadow
And coughs when you would kiss.

In headaches and in worry
(30) Vaguely life leaks away,
And Time will have his fancy
To-morrow or to-day.

Into many a green valley
Drifts the appalling snow;
(35) Time breaks the threaded dances
And the diver's brilliant bow.

O plunge your hands in water,
Plunge them in up to the wrist;
Stare, stare in the basin
(40) And wonder what you've missed.

The glacier knocks in the cupboard,
The desert sighs in the bed,
And the crack in the tea-cup opens
A lane to the land of the dead.

(45) Where the beggars raffle the banknotes
And the Giant is enchanting to Jack,
And the Lily-white Boy is a Roarer,
And Jill goes down on her back.

O look, look in the mirror,
(50) O look in your distress;
Life remains a blessing
Although you cannot bless.

O stand, stand at the window
As the tears scald and start; -
(55) You shall love your crooked neighbour
With your crooked heart."

It was late, late in the evening
The lovers they were gone;
The clocks had ceased their chiming,
And the deep river ran on.

1985 Poems: “There Was A Boy” (William Wordsworth) and “The Most of It” (Robert Frost)

Prompt: These two poems present encounters with nature, but the two poets handle those encounters very differently. In a well-organized essay, distinguish between the attitudes (toward nature, toward the solitary individual, etc.) expressed in the poems and discuss the techniques that the poets use to present these attitudes. Be sure to support your statements with specific references.

There was a boy by William Wordsworth

There was a boy; ye knew him well, ye cliffs
And islands of Winander! -- many a time,
At evening, when the earliest stars began
move along the edges of the hills,
5 or setting, would he stand alone,
Beneath the trees, or by the glimmering lake;
And there, with fingers interwoven, both hands
Pressed closely palm to palm and to his mouth
Uplifted, he, as through an instrument,
10 Blew mimic hootings to the silent owls
That they might answer him.--And they would shout
Across the watery vale, and shout again,
Responsive to his call,--with quivering peals,
And long halloos, and screams, and echoes loud
15 Redoubled and redoubled; concourse wild
Of jocund din! And, when there came a pause
Of silence such as baffled his best skill:
Then, sometimes, in that silence, while he hung
Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprise
20 Has carried far into his heart the voice
Of mountain-torrents; or the visible scene
Would enter unawares into his mind
With all its solemn imagery, its rocks,
Its woods, and that uncertain heaven received
25 Into the bosom of the steady lake.

Notes: The vale of Esthwaite with its village of Hawkshead, the school which Wordsworth attended, and the nearby churchyard as here described. The schoolmate whose grave was in the churchyard was probably John Vickers who died in 1782, when Wordsworth was twelve.

The Most of It by Robert Frost

He thought he kept the universe alone;
For all the voice in answer he could wake
Was but the mocking echo of his own
From some tree-hidden cliff across the lake.
5 Some morning from the boulder-broken beach
He would cry out on life, that what it wants
Is not its own love back in copy speech,
But counter-love, original response.
And nothing ever came of what he cried
10 Unless it was the embodiment that crashed
In the cliff's talus¹ on the other side,
And then in the far-distant water splashed,
But after a time allowed for it to swim,
Instead of proving human when it neared
15 And someone else additional to him,
As a great buck it powerfully appeared,
Pushing the crumpled water up ahead,
And landed pouring like a waterfall,
And stumbled through the rocks with horny tread,
20 And forced the underbrush--and that was all.

¹ rock debris at the bottom of a cliff

1986 Poem: "Ogun" (E. K. Braithwaite)

Prompt: Read the poem. You will note that it has two major sections that are joined by another section lines 21-26. Write an essay in which you discuss how the diction, imagery, and movement of verse in the poem reflect differences in tone and content between the two larger sections.

Ogun¹ by Edward Kamau Braithwaite

My uncle made chairs, tables, balanced doors on, dug out
coffins, smoothing the white wood out

with plane and quick sandpaper until
it shone like his short-sighted glasses.

5 The knuckles of his hands were sil-
vered knobs of nails hit, hurt and flat-

tened out with blast of heavy hammer. He was knock-knee'd, flat-
footed and his clip clop sandals slapped across the concrete

10 flooring of his little shop where canefield mulemen and a fleet
of Bedford lorry drivers² dropped in to scratch themselves and talk.

There was no shock of wood, no beam
of light mahogany his saw teeth couldn't handle.

When shaping squares for locks, a key hole
care tapped rat tat tat upon the handle

15 of his humpbacked chisel. Cold
world of wood caught fire as he whittled: rectangle

window frames, the intersecting x of fold-
ing chairs, triangle

20 trellises, the donkey
box-cart in its squeaking square.

But he was poor and most days he was hungry
Imported cabinets with mirrors, formica table

tops, spine-curving chairs made up of tubes, with hollow
steel-like bird bones that sat on rubber ploughs,

25 thin beds, stretched not on boards, but blue high-tensioned cables,
were what the world preferred.

And yet he had a block of wood that would have baffled them.
With knife and gimlet care he worked away at this on Sundays,

30 explored its knotted hurts, cutting his way
along its yellow whorls until his hands could feel

how it had swelled and shivered, breathing air,
its weathered green burning to rings of time,

its contoured grain still tuned to roots and water.
And as he cut, he heard the creak of forests:

35 green lizard faces gulped, grey memories with moth
eyes watched him from their shadows, soft

liquid tendrils leaked among the flowers
and a black rigid thunder he had never heard within his hammer

40 came stomping up the trunks. And as he worked within his shattered
Sunday shop, the wood took shape: dry shuttered

eyes, slack anciently everted lips, flat
ruined face, eaten by pox, ravaged by rat

and woodworm, dry cistern mouth, cracked
gullet crying for the desert, the heavy black

45 enduring jaw; lost pain, lost iron;
emerging woodwork image. of his anger.

'Ogun is the Yoruba and Afro-Caribbean creator-god.

²lorry: truck

1987 Poem: "Sow" (Sylvia Plath)

Prompt: Read the poem. Then write an essay in which you analyze the presentation of the sow. Consider particularly how the language of the poem reflects both the neighbor's and the narrator's perceptions of the sow and how the language determines the reader's perceptions. Be certain to discuss how the portrayal of the sow is enhanced by such features as diction, devices of sound, images, and allusions.

Sow by Sylvia Plath

God knows how our neighbor managed to breed
His great sow:
Whatever his shrewd secret, he kept it hid

5 In the same way
He kept the sow -- impounded from public stare,
Prize ribbon and pig show.

But one dusk our questions commended us to a tour
Through his lantern-lit
Maze of barns to the lintel of the sunk sty door

10 To gape at it:
This was no rose-and-larkspurred china suckling
With a penny slot

For thrifty children, nor dolt pig ripe for heckling,
About to be

15 Glorified for prime flesh and golden crackling

In a parsley halo;
Nor even one of the common barnyard sows,
Mire-smirched, blowzy,

20 Maunching thistle and knotweed on her snout-cruise --
Bloat tun of milk
On the move, hedged by a litter of feat-foot ninnies

Shrilling her hulk
To halt for a swig at the pink teats. No. This vast
Brobdingnag bulk

25 Of a sow lounged belly-bedded on that black compost,
Fat-ruttred eyes
Dream-filmed. What a vision of ancient hoghood must

Thus wholly engross
The great grandam! -- our marvel blazoned a knight,

30 Helmed, in cuirass,

Unhorsed and shredded in the grove of combat
By a grisly-bristled
Boar, fabulous enough to straddle that sow's heat.

35 But our farmer whistled,
Then, with a jocular fist thwacked the barrel nape,
And the green-copse-castled

Pig hove, letting legend like dried mud drop,
Slowly, grunt
On grunt, up in the flickering light to shape

- 40 A monument
Prodigious in gluttonies as that hog whose want
Made lean Lent
Of kitchen slops and, stomaching no constraint,
Proceeded to swill
- 45 The seven troughed seas and every earthquaking continent.

1988 Poems: "Bright Star" (John Keats) and "Choose Something Like a Star" (Robert Frost)

Prompt: Read the following two poems very carefully, noting that the second includes an allusion to the first. Then write a well-organized essay in which you discuss their similarities and differences. In your essay, be sure to consider both theme and style.

Bright Star by John Keats

Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art--
Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night
And watching, with eternal lids apart,
Like nature's patient, sleepless Eremite,
5 The moving waters at their priestlike task
Of pure ablution round earth's human shores,
Or gazing on the new soft-fallen mask
Of snow upon the mountains and the moors--
No--yet still stedfast, still unchangeable,
10 Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,
To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,
Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,
Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,
And so live ever--or else swoon to death.

Choose Something Like a Star by Robert Frost

O Star (the fairest one in sight),
We grant your loftiness the right
To some obscurity of cloud --
It will not do to say of night,
5 Since dark is what brings out your light.
Some mystery becomes the proud.
But to be wholly taciturn
In your reserve is not allowed.

Say something to us we can learn
10 By heart and when alone repeat.
Say something! And it says "I burn."
But say with what degree of heat.
Talk Fahrenheit, talk Centigrade.
Use language we can comprehend.
15 Tell us what elements you blend.

It gives us strangely little aid,
But does tell something in the end.
And steadfast as Keats' Eremite,
Not even stooping from its sphere,
20 It asks a little of us here.
It asks of us a certain height,
So when at times the mob is swayed
To carry praise or blame too far,
We may choose something like a star
25 To stay our minds on and be staid.

1989 Poem: "The Great Scarf of Birds" (John Updike)

Prompt: Write a well-organized essay in which you analyze how the poem's organization, diction, and figurative language prepare the reader for the speaker's concluding response.

Playing golf on Cape Ann in October,
I saw something to remember.

(5) Ripe apples were caught like red fish in the nets
of their branches. The maples
were colored like apples,
part orange and red, part green.
The elms, already transparent trees,
seemed swaying vases full of sky. The sky
(10) was dramatic with great straggling V's
of geese streaming south, mare's-tails above them.
Their trumpeting made us look up and around.
The course sloped into salt marshes,
and this seemed to cause the abundance of birds.

(15) As if out of the Bible
or science fiction,
a cloud appeared, a cloud of dots
like iron filings which a magnet
underneath the paper undulates.
It dartingly darkened in spots,
(20) paled, pulsed, compressed, distended, yet
held an identity firm: a flock
of starlings, as much one thing as a rock.
One will moved above the trees
the liquid and hesitant drift.

(25) Come nearer, it became less marvellous,
more legible, and merely huge.
"I never saw so many birds!" my friend exclaimed.
We returned our eyes to the game.
Later, as Lot's wife must have done,
(30) in a pause of walking, not thinking of calling down a consequence,
I lazily looked around.

(35) The rise of the fairway above us was tinted,
so evenly tinted I might not have noticed
but that at the rim of the delicate shadow
the starlings were thicker and outlined the flock
as an inkstain in drying pronounces its edges.
The gradual rise of green was vastly covered;
I had thought nothing in nature could be so broad
(40) but grass.

And as
I watched, one bird,
prompted by accident or will to lead,
ceased resting; and, lifting in a casual billow,
(45) the flock ascended as a lady's scarf,
transparent, of gray, might be twitched
by one corner, drawn upward and then,
decided against, negligently tossed toward a chair:
the southward cloud withdrew into the air.
(50) Long had it been since my heart
had been lifted as it was by the lifting of that great scarf.

1990 Poem: Soliloquy from *Henry IV, Part II* (William Shakespeare)

Prompt: In the soliloquy, King Henry laments his inability to sleep. In a well-organized essay, briefly summarize the King's thoughts and analyze how the diction, imagery, and syntax help to convey his state of mind.

Soliloquy from Henry IV Part II

How many thousand of my poorest subjects
Are at this hour asleep! O sleep! O gentle sleep!
Nature's soft nurse, how have I frightened thee,
That thou no more wilt weigh my eyelids down,
5 And steep my senses in forgetfulness?
Why rather, sleep, liest thou in smoky cribs*,
Upon uneasy pallets stretching thee,
And hush'd with buzzing night-flies to thy slumber,
Than in the perfum'd chambers of the great,
10 Under the canopies of costly state,
And lull'd with sound of sweetest melody?
O thou dull god, why liest thou with the vile
In loathsome beds, and leav'st the kingly couch
A watch-case or a common Ôlarum-bell?
15 Wilt thou upon the high and giddy mast
Seal up the ship-boy's eyes, and rock his brains
In cradle of the rude imperious surge,
And in the visitation of the winds,
Who take the ruffian billows by the top,
20 Curling their monstrous heads ad hanging them
With deaf'ning clamour in the slippery clouds,
That with the hurly death itself awakes?
Canst thou, O partial* sleep, give thy repose
To the wet sea-boy in an hour so rude,
25 And in the calmest and most stillest night,
With all appliances and means to boot,
Deny it to a King? Then, happy low, lie down!
Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.

*cribs: huts; *partial: not impartial

1991 Poem: "The Last Night that She lived..." (Emily Dickinson)

Prompt: Write an essay in which you describe the speaker's attitude toward the woman's death. Using specific references from the text, show how the use of language reveals the speaker's attitude.

The Last Night that She Lived by Emily Dickinson

The last Night that She lived
It was a Common Night
Except the Dying—this to Us
Made Nature different

5 We noticed smallest things—
Things overlooked before
By this great light upon our Minds
Italicized—as 'twere.

10 As We went out and in
Between Her final Room
And Rooms where Those to be alive
Tomorrow were, a Blame

15 That Others could exist
While She must finish quite
A Jealousy for Her arose
So nearly infinite—

20 We waited while She passed—
It was a narrow time—
Too jostled were Our Souls to speak
At length the notice came.

She mentioned, and forgot—
Then lightly as a Reed
Bent to the Water, struggled scarce—
Consented, and was dead—

25 And We—We placed the Hair—
And drew the Head erect—
And then an awful leisure was
Belief to regulate—

1992 Poem: Excerpt from “The Prelude” (William Wordsworth)

Prompt: In the autobiographical passage below, the speaker encounters unfamiliar aspects of the natural world. Write an essay in which you trace the speaker’s changing responses to his experience and explain how they are conveyed by the poem’s diction, imagery, and tone.

- One summer evening (led by her¹) I found
A little boat tied to a willow tree
Within a rocky cave, its usual home.
Straight I unloosed her chain, and stepping in
(5) Pushed from the shore. It was an act of stealth
And troubled pleasure, nor without the voice
Of mountain-echoes did my boat move on;
Leaving behind her still, on either side,
Small circles glittering idly in the moon,
(10) Until they melted all into one track
Of sparkling light. But now, like one who rows,
Proud of his skill, to reach a chosen point
With an unswerving line, I fixed my view
Upon the summit of a craggy ridge,
(15) The horizon’s utmost boundary; far above
Was nothing but the stars and the grey sky.
She was an elfin pinnacle² lustily
I dipped my oars into the silent lake,
And, as I rose upon the stroke, my boat
(20) Went heaving through the water like a swan;
When, from behind that craggy steep till then
The horizon’s bound, a huge peak, black and huge,
As if with voluntary power instinct
Upreared its head. I struck and struck again,
(25) And growing still in stature the grim shape
Towered up between me and the stars, and still,
For so it seemed, with purpose of its own
And measured motion like a living thing,
Strode after me. With trembling oars I turned,
(30) And through the silent water stole my way
Back to the covert of the willow tree;
There in her mooring place I left my bark,—
And through the meadows homeward went, in grave
And serious mood; but after I had seen
(35) That spectacle, for many days, my brain
Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
Of unknown modes of being; o’er my thoughts
There hung a darkness, call it solitude
Or blank desertion. No familiar shapes
(40) Remained, no pleasant images of trees,
Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields;
But huge and mighty forms, that do not live
Like living men, moved slowly through the mind
By day, and were a trouble to my dreams.

¹Nature

²Small boat

1993 Poem: "The Centaur" (May Swenson)

Prompt: Read the following poem carefully. Then write an essay in which you discuss how such elements as language, imagery, structure, and point of view convey meaning in the poem.

The Centaur by May Swenson

The summer that I was ten --
Can it be there was only one
summer that I was ten?

It must have been a long one then --
5 each day I'd go out to choose
a fresh horse from my stable

which was a willow grove
down by the old canal.
I'd go on my two bare feet.

10 But when, with my brother's jack-knife,
I had cut me a long limber horse
with a good thick knob for a head,

and peeled him slick and clean
except a few leaves for the tail,
15 and cinched my brother's belt

around his head for a rein,
I'd straddle and canter him fast
up the grass bank to the path,

trot along in the lovely dust
20 that talcumed over his hoofs,
hiding my toes, and turning

his feet to swift half-moons.
The willow knob with the strap
jouncing between my thighs

25 was the pommel and yet the poll
of my nickering pony's head.
My head and my neck were mine,

yet they were shaped like a horse.
My hair flopped to the side
30 like the mane of a horse in the wind.

My forelock swung in my eyes,
my neck arched and I snorted.

I shied and skittered and reared,
stopped and raised my knees,
35 pawed at the ground and quivered.
My teeth bared as we wheeled

and swished through the dust again. I
was the horse and the rider,
and the leather I slapped to his rump

40 spanked my own behind.
Doubled, my two hoofs beat
a gallop along the bank,

the wind twanged in my mane,
my mouth squared to the bit.
45 And yet I sat on my steed

quiet, negligent riding,
my toes standing the stirrups,
my thighs hugging his ribs.

At a walk we drew up to the porch.
50 I tethered him to a paling.
Dismounting, I smoothed my skirt

and entered the dusky hall.
My feet on the clean linoleum
left ghostly toes in the hall.

55 Where have you been? said my mother.
Been riding, I said from the sink,
and filled me a glass of water.

What's that in your pocket? she said.
Just my knife. It weighted my pocket
60 and stretched my dress awry.

Go tie back your hair, said my mother,
and Why is your mouth all green?
Rob Roy, he pulled some clover
as we crossed the field, I told her.

1994 Poems: "To Helen" (Edgar Allan Poe) and "Helen" (H.D.)

Prompt: The following two poems are about Helen of Troy. Renowned in the ancient world for her beauty, Helen was the wife of Menelaus, a Greek King. She was carried off to Troy by the Trojan prince Paris, and her abduction was the immediate cause of the Trojan War. Read the two poems carefully. Considering such elements as speaker, diction, imagery, form, and tone, write a well-organized essay in which you contrast the speakers' views of Helen.

To Helen by Edgar Allan Poe

Helen, thy beauty is to me
Like those Nicean barks of yore,
That gently, o'er a perfum'd sea,
The weary way-worn wanderer bore
5 To his own native shore.

On desperate seas long wont to roam,
Thy hyacinth hair, thy classic face,
Thy Naiad airs have brought me home
To the beauty of fair Greece,
10 And the grandeur of old Rome.

Lo ! in that little window-niche
How statue-like I see thee stand!
The folded scroll within thy hand —
A Psyche from the regions which
15 Are Holy land !

Helen by H. D.

All Greece hates
the still eyes in the white face,
the lustre of olives
where she stands,
5 and the white hands.

All Greece reviles
the wan face when she smiles,
hating it deeper still
when it grows wan and white,
10 remembering past enchantments
and past ills.

Greece sees unmoved,
God's daughter, born of love,
the beauty of cool feet
and slenderest knees,
15 could love indeed the maid,
only if she were laid,
white ash amid funereal cypresses.

1995 Poem: "The Broken Heart" (John Donne)

Prompt: Read the following poem carefully. Then, in a well-organized essay, analyze how the speaker uses the varied imagery of the poem to reveal his attitude toward the nature of love.

The Broken Heart by John Donne

He is stark mad, whoever says,
That he hath been in love an hour,
Yet not that love so soon decays,
But that it can ten in less space devour ;
5 Who will believe me, if I swear
That I have had the plague a year?
Who would not laugh at me, if I should say
I saw a flash of powder burn a day?

Ah, what a trifle is a heart,
10 If once into love's hands it come !
All other griefs allow a part
To other griefs, and ask themselves but some ;
They come to us, but us love draws ;
He swallows us and never chaws ;
15 By him, as by chain'd shot, whole ranks do die ;
He is the tyrant pike, our hearts the fry.

If 'twere not so, what did become
Of my heart when I first saw thee?
I brought a heart into the room,
20 But from the room I carried none with me.
If it had gone to thee, I know
Mine would have taught thine heart to show
More pity unto me ; but Love, alas !
At one first blow did shiver it as glass.

25 Yet nothing can to nothing fall,
Nor any place be empty quite ;
Therefore I think my breast hath all
Those pieces still, though they be not unite ;
And now, as broken glasses show
30 A hundred lesser faces, so
My rags of heart can like, wish, and adore,
But after one such love, can love no more.

1996 Poem: "The Author to Her Book" (Anne Bradstreet)

Prompt: Read carefully the following poem by the colonial American poet, Anne Bradstreet. Then write a well-organized essay in which you discuss how the poem's controlling metaphor expresses the complex attitude of the speaker.

The Author to Her Book by Anne Bradstreet

Thou ill-form'd offspring of my feeble brain,
Who after birth did'st by my side remain,
Till snatcht from thence by friends, less wise than true
Who thee abroad, expos'd to publick view;
Made thee in rags, halting to th' press to trudge, (5)
Where errors were not lessened (all may judge)
At thy return my blushing was not small,
My rambling brat (in print) should mother call,
I cast thee by as one unfit for light,
Thy visage was so irksome in my sight; (10)
Yet being mine own, at length affection would
Thy blemishes amend, if so I could:
I wash'd thy face, but more defects I saw,
And rubbing off a spot, still made a flaw.
I stretcht thy joints to make thee even feet, (15)
Yet still thou run'st more hobbling than is meet;
In better dress to trim thee was my mind,
But nought save home-spun cloth, i' th' house I find.
In this array, 'mongst vulgars mayst thou roam
In critics hands, beware thou dost not come; (20)
And take thy way where yet thou art not known,
If for thy father askt, say, thou hadst none:
And for thy mother, she alas is poor,
Which caus'd her thus to send thee out of door.

1997 Poem: "The Death of a Toad" (Richard Wilbur)

Prompt: Read the following poem carefully. Then write a well-organized essay in which you explain how formal elements such as structure, syntax, diction, and imagery reveal the speaker's response to the death of a toad.

The Death of a Toad by Richard Wilbur

A toad the power mower caught,
Chewed and clipped of a leg, with a hobbling hop has got
To the garden verge, and sanctuaried him
Under the cineraria leaves, in the shade
5 Of the ashen heartshaped leaves, in a dim,
 Low, and a final glade.

The rare original heartsblood goes,
Spends on the earthen hide, in the folds and wizenings, flows
In the gutters of the banked and staring eyes. He lies
10 As still as if he would return to stone,
 And soundlessly attending, dies
 Toward some deep monotone,

Toward misted and ebullient seas
And cooling shores, toward lost Amphibia's emperies.
15 Day dwindles, drowning, and at length is gone
 In the wide and antique eyes, which still appear
 To watch, across the castrate lawn,
 The haggard daylight steer.

1998 Poem: "It's a Woman's World" (Eavan Boland)

Prompt: The following poem was written by a contemporary Irish woman, Eavan Boland. Read the poem carefully and then write an essay in which you analyze how the poem reveals the speaker's complex conception of a "woman's world."

It's a Woman's World by Eavan Boland

	Our way of life has hardly changed since a wheel first whetted a knife.	30	When the king's head gored its basket, grim harvest, we were gristing bread
5	Maybe flame burns more greedily and wheels are steadier, but we're the same:	35	or getting the recipe for a good soup. It's still the same:
10	we milestone our lives with oversights, living by the lights of the loaf left	40	our windows moth our children to the flame of hearth not history.
15	by the cash register, the washing powder paid for and wrapped, the wash left wet:	45	And still no page scores the low music of our outrage.
20	like most historic peoples we are defined by what we forget	50	Appearances reassure: that woman there, craned to the starry mystery,
25	and what we never will be: star-gazers, fire-eaters. It's our alibi for all time:		is merely getting a breath of evening air. While this one here, her mouth a burning plume -
	as far as history goes we were never on the scene of the crime.		she's no fire-eater, just my frosty neighbour coming home.

1999 Poem: "Blackberry-Picking" (Seamus Heaney)

Prompt: 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 by Seamus Heaney

Late August, given heavy rain and sun
For a full week, the blackberries would ripen.
At first, just one, a glossy purple clot
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-drills
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.
We hoarded the fresh berries in the byre.
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.

2000 Poems: Siren passage from the *Odyssey* (Homer) / “Siren Song” (Margaret Atwood)

Prompt: The story of Odysseus’ encounter with the Sirens and their enchanting but deadly song appears in Greek epic poetry in Homer’s *Odyssey*. An English translation of the episode is reprinted in the left column below. Margaret Atwood’s poem in the right column is a modern commentary on the classical story. Read both texts carefully. Then write an essay in which you compare the portrayals of the Sirens. Your analysis should include discussion of tone, point of view, and whatever poetic devices (diction, imagery, etc.) seem most appropriate.

. . . our trim ship was speeding toward
the Sirens’ island, driven by the brisk wind.

. . .

5 Now with a sharp sword I sliced an ample wheel of beeswax
down into pieces, kneaded them in my two strong hands
and the wax soon grew soft, worked by my strength
and Helios’ burning rays, the sun at high noon,
and I stopped the ears of my comrades one by one.
They bound me hand and foot in the tight ship –
erect at the mast-block, lashed by ropes to the mast –
10 and rowed and churned the whitecaps stroke on stroke.
We were just offshore as far as a man’s shout can carry,
scudding close, when the Sirens sensed at once a ship
was racing past and burst into their high, thrilling song:
“Come closer, famous Odysseus – Achaea’s pride and glory –
15 moor your ship on our coast so you can hear our song!
Never has a sailor passed our shores in his black craft
until he has heard the honeyed voices pouring from our lips,
and once he hears to his heart’s content sails on, a wiser man.”

. . .

20 So they sent their ravishing voices out across the air
and the heart inside me throbbed to listen longer.
I signaled the crew with frowns to set me free –
they flung themselves at the oars and rowed on harder.
Perimedes and Eurylochus springing up at once
to bind me faster with rope on chafing rope.
25 But once we’d left the Sirens fading in our wake,
once we could hear their song no more, their urgent call –
My steadfast crew was quick to removed the wax I’d used
to seal their ears and loosed the bonds that lashed me.

Siren Song by Margaret Atwood

This is the one song everyone
would like to learn: the song
that is irresistible:

5 the song that forces men
to leap overboard in squadrons
even though they see beached skulls

10 the song nobody knows
because anyone who had heard it
is dead, and the others can't remember.
Shall I tell you the secret
and if I do, will you get me
out of this bird suit?
I don't enjoy it here
squatting on this island
15 looking picturesque and mythical
with these two feathery maniacs,
I don't enjoy singing
this trio, fatal and valuable.

20 I will tell the secret to you,
to you, only to you.
Come closer. This song

is a cry for help: Help me!
Only you, only you can,
you are unique

25 at last. Alas
it is a boring song
but it works every time.

2001 Poems: “London, 1802” (William Wordsworth) / “Douglass” (Paul Laurence Dunbar)

Prompt: In each of the following poems, the speaker responds to the conditions of a particular place and time – England in 1802 in the first poem, the United States about 100 years later in the second. Read each poem carefully. Then write an essay in which you compare and contrast the two poems and analyze the relationship between them.

London, 1802 by William Wordsworth

Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour:
England hath need of thee: she is a fen
Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen,
Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,
5 Have forfeited their ancient English dower
Of inward happiness. We are selfish men;
Oh! raise us up, return to us again;
And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power.
Thy soul was like a Star, and dwelt apart:
10 Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea:
Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,
So didst thou travel on life's common way,
In cheerful godliness; and yet the heart
The lowliest duties on herself did lay.

Douglass by Paul Laurence Dunbar

Ah, Douglass, we have fall'n on evil days,
Such days as thou, not even thou didst know,
When thee, the eyes of that harsh long ago
Saw, salient, at the cross of devious ways,
5 And all the country heard thee with amaze.
Not ended then, the passionate ebb and flow,
The awful tide that battled to and fro;
We ride amid a tempest of dispraise.

10 Now, when the waves of swift dissension swarm,
And Honor, the strong pilot, lieth stark,
Oh, for thy voice high-sounding o'er the storm,
For thy strong arm to guide the shivering bark,
The blast-defying power of thy form,
To give us comfort through the lonely dark.

2002 Poem: "The Convergence of the Twain" (Thomas Hardy)

Prompt: Read the following poem carefully. Then, taking into consideration the title of the poem, analyze how the poetic devices convey the speaker's attitude toward the sinking of the ship.

The Convergence of the Twain by Thomas Hardy

(Lines on the loss of the "Titanic")

I

In a solitude of the sea
Deep from human vanity,
And the Pride of Life that planned her, stilly couches she.

II

5 Steel chambers, late the pyres
 Of her salamandrine fires,
Cold currents thrid, and turn to rhythmic tidal lyres.

III

 Over the mirrors meant
 To glass the opulent
10 The sea-worm crawls—grotesque, slimed, dumb, indifferent.

IV

 Jewels in joy designed
 To ravish the sensuous mind
Lie lightless, all their sparkles bleared and black and blind.

V

 Dim moon-eyed fishes near
15 Gaze at the gilded gear
And query: "What does this vaingloriousness down here?" . . .

VI

 Well: while was fashioning
 This creature of cleaving wing,
The Immanent Will that stirs and urges everything

VII

20 Prepared a sinister mate
 For her—so gaily great—
A Shape of Ice, for the time fat and dissociate.

VIII

 And as the smart ship grew
 In stature, grace, and hue
25 In shadowy silent distance grew the Iceberg too.

IX

 Alien they seemed to be:
 No mortal eye could see
The intimate welding of their later history.

X

 Or sign that they were bent
 By paths coincident
30 On being anon twin halves of one august event,

XI

 Till the Spinner of the Years
 Said "Now!" And each one hears,
And consummation comes, and jars two hemispheres.

2002B Poem: "If I Could Tell You" (W. H. Auden)

Prompt: The following poem is a villanelle, a form having strict rules of rhyme, meter, and repetition. Read the poem carefully. Then write a well-organized essay in which you analyze how the formal elements of the poem contribute to its meaning.

If I Could Tell You by W.H. Auden

Time will say nothing but I told you so,
Time only knows the price we have to pay;
If I could tell you I would let you know.

5 If we should weep when clowns put on their show,
If we should stumble when musicians play,
Time will say nothing but I told you so.

There are no fortunes to be told, although,
Because I love you more than I can say,
If I could tell you I would let you know.

10 The winds must come from somewhere when they blow,
There must be reasons why the leaves decay;
Time will say nothing but I told you so.

15 Perhaps the roses really want to grow,
The vision seriously intends to stay;
If I could tell you I would let you know.

Suppose all the lions get up and go,
And all the brooks and soldiers run away;
Will Time say nothing but I told you so?
If I could tell you I would let you know.

2003 Poem: “EPΩΣ” (Robert Bridges) / “Eros” (Anne Stevenson)

Prompt: The following poems are both concerned with Eros, the god of love in Greek mythology. Read the poem carefully. Then write an essay in which you compare and contrast the two concepts of Eros and analyze the techniques used to create them.

EPΩΣ¹ by Robert Bridges

Why hast thou nothing in thy face?
Thou idol of the human race,
Thou tyrant of the human heart,
The flower of lovely youth that art;
5 Yea, and that standest in thy youth
An image of eternal Truth,
With thy exuberant flesh so fair,
That only Pheidias² might compare,
Ere from his chaste marmoreal³ form
10 Time had decayed the colours warm;
Like to his gods in thy proud dress,
Thy starry sheen of nakedness.

Surely thy body is thy mind,
For in thy face is nought to find,
15 Only thy soft unchristen'd smile,
That shadows neither love nor guile,
But shame; less will and power
immense,
In secret sensuous innocence.

20 O king of joy, what is thy thought?
I dream thou knowest it is nought.
And wouldst in darkness come, but thou
Makest the light where'er thou go.
Ah yet no victim of thy grace,
25 None who e'er long'd for thy embrace,
Hath cared to look upon thy face.

¹ Eros in Greek

² Greek sculptor of the fifth century B.C.

³ marble

Eros by Anne Stevenson

I call for love
But help me, who arrives?
This thud with broken nose
And squinty eyes.
5 'Eros, my bully boy,
Can this be you,
With boxer lips
And patchy wings askew?'

'Madam,' cries Eros,
10 'Know the brute you see
Is what long overuse
Has made of me.
My face that so offends you
Is the sum
15 Of blows your lust delivered
One by one.

We slaves who are immortal
Gloss your fate
And are the archetypes
20 That you create.
Better my battered visage,
Bruised but hot,
Than love dissolved in loss
Or left to rot.'

2003B Poem: from *Modern Love* (George Meredith - 1862)

Prompt: The following poem is taken from *Modern Love*, a poetic sequence by the English writer George Meredith. Read the poem carefully. Then write a well-organized essay in which you analyze how the poet conveys a view of “modern love.”

Modern Love I: By This He Knew She Wept by George Meredith

By this he knew she wept with waking eyes:
That, at his hand's light quiver by her head,
The strange low sobs that shook their common bed
Were called into her with a sharp surprise,
5 And strangled mute, like little gaping snakes,
Dreadfully venomous to him. She lay
Stone-still, and the long darkness flowed away
With muffled pulses. Then, as midnight makes
Her giant heart of Memory and Tears
10 Drink the pale drug of silence, and so beat
Sleep's heavy measure, they from head to feet
Were moveless, looking through their dead black years,
By vain regret scrawled over the blank wall.
Like sculptured effigies they might be seen
15 Upon their marriage-tomb, the sword between;
Each wishing for the sword that severs all.

2004 Poem: “We Grow Accustomed to the Dark” (Emily Dickinson) / “Acquainted with the Night” (Robert Frost)

Prompt: The poems below are concerned with darkness and night. Read each poem carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, compare and contrast the poems, analyzing the significance of dark or night in each. In your essay, consider elements such as point of view, imagery, and structure

We Grow Accustomed to the Dark by Emily Dickinson

We grow accustomed to the Dark --
When light is put away --
As when the Neighbor holds the Lamp
To witness her Goodbye --

5 A Moment -- We uncertain step
 For newness of the night --
 Then -- fit our Vision to the Dark --
 And meet the Road -- erect --

10 And so of larger -- Darknesses --
 Those Evenings of the Brain --
 When not a Moon disclose a sign --
 Or Star -- come out -- within --

15 The Bravest -- grope a little --
 And sometimes hit a Tree
 Directly in the Forehead --
 But as they learn to see --

20 Either the Darkness alters --
 Or something in the sight
 Adjusts itself to Midnight --
 And Life steps almost straight.

Acquainted with the Night by Robert Frost

I have been one acquainted with the night.
I have walked out in rain -- and back in rain.
I have outwalked the furthest city light.

5 I have looked down the saddest city lane.
 I have passed by the watchman on his beat
 And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.

10 I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
 When far away an interrupted cry
 Came over houses from another street,

 But not to call me back or say good-bye;
 And further still at an unearthly height,
 A luminary clock against the sky

 Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.
 I have been one acquainted with the night.

2004B Poem: "Crossing the Swamp" (Mary Oliver)

Prompt: Read the following poem carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze the techniques the poet uses to develop the relationship between the speaker and the swamp.

Crossing the Swamp by Mary Oliver

Here is the endless
wet thick
cosmos, the center
of everything -- the nugget
5 of dense sap, branching
vines, the dark burred
faintly belching
bogs. Here
is swamp, here
10 is struggle,
closure--
pathless, seamless,
peerless mud. My bones
knock together at the pale
15 joints, trying
for foothold, fingerhold,
mindhold over
such slick crossings, deep
hipholes, hummocks¹
20 that sink silently
into the black, slack
earthsoup. I feel
not wet so much as
painted and glittered
25 with the fat grassy
mires, the rich
and succulent marrows
of earth--a poor
dry stick given
30 one more chance by the whims
of swamp water--a bough
that still, after all these years,
could take root,
sprout, branch out, bud--
35 make of its life a breathing
palace of leaves.

¹ low mounds of earth

2005 Poem: "The Chimney Sweeper" (two poems of same name by William Blake)

Prompt: The poems below, published in 1789 and 1794, were written by William Blake in response to the condition of chimney sweeps. Usually small children, sweeps were forced inside chimneys to clean their interiors. Read the two poems carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, compare and contrast the two poems, taking into consideration the poetic techniques Blake uses in each.

The Chimney Sweeper (1789)

When my mother died I was very young,
And my father sold me while yet my tongue
Could scarcely cry "weep! weep! weep! weep!"¹
So your chimneys I sweep, & in soot I sleep.

- 5 There's little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head,
That curl'd like a lamb's back, was shav'd: so I said
"Hush, Tom! never mind it, for when your head's bare
You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair."

- And so he was quiet, & that very night,
10 As Tom was a-sleeping, he had such a sight! ---
That thousand of sweepers, Dick, Joe, Ned, & Jack,
Were all of them lock'd up in coffins of black.

- And by came an Angel who had a bright key,
And he open'd the coffins & set them all free;
15 Then down a green plain leaping, laughing, they run,
And wash in a river, and shine in the Sun.

- Then naked & white, all their bags left behind,
They rise upon clouds and sport in the wind;
And the Angel told Tom, if he'd be a good boy,
20 He'd have God for his father, & never want joy.

And so Tom awoke; and we rose in the dark,
And got with our bags & our brushes to work.
Tho' the morning was cold, Tom was happy & warm;
So if all do their duty they need not fear harm.

¹The child's lisping attempt at the chimney sweep's street cry, "Sweep! Sweep!"

The Chimney Sweeper (1794)

A little black thing among the snow,
Crying "weep! 'weep!" in notes of woe!
"Where are thy father and mother? say?"
"They are both gone up to the church to pray.

- 5 Because I was happy upon the heath,
And smil'd among the winter's snow,
They clothed me in the clothes of death,
And taught me to sing the notes of woe.

- And because I am happy and dance and sing,
10 They think they have done me no injury,
And are gone to praise God and his Priest and King,
Who make up a heaven of our misery."

2005B Poem: “Five A.M.” (William Stafford) / “Five Flights Up” (Elizabeth Bishop)
Prompt: Carefully read the two poems below. Then in a well-organized essay compare the speakers’ reflections on their early morning surroundings and analyze the techniques the poets use to communicate the speakers’ different states of mind.

Five A. M. by William Stafford

- Still dark, the early morning breathes
A soft sound above the fire. Hooded
Lights on porches lead past lawns,
A hedge; I pass the house of the couple
5 Who have the baby, the yard with the little
Dog; my feet pad and grit on the pavement, flicker
Past streetlights; my arms alternate
Easily to my pace. Where are my troubles?
- There are people in every country who never
10 Turn into killers, saints have built
Sanctuaries on islands and in valleys,
Conquerors have quit and gone home, for thousands
Of years farmers have worked their fields.
My feet begin the uphill curve
15 Where a thicket spills with birds every spring.
The air doesn’t stir. Rain touches my face.

Five Flights Up by Elizabeth Bishop

- Still dark.
The unknown bird sits on his usual branch.
The little dog next door barks in his sleep
inquiringly, just once.
5 Perhaps in his sleep, too, the bird inquires
once or twice, quavering.
Questions---if that is what they are---
answered directly, simply,
by day itself.
- 10 Enormous morning, ponderous, meticulous;
gray light streaking each bare branch,
each single twig, along one side,
making another tree, of glassy veins...
The bird still sits there. Now he seems to yawn.
- 15 The little black dog runs in his yard.
His owner’s voice arises, stern,
“You ought to be ashamed!”
What has he done?
He bounces cheerfully up and down;
20 he rushes in circles in the fallen leaves.
- Obviously, he has no sense of shame.
He and the bird know everything is answered,
all taken care of,
no need to ask again.
- 25 ---Yesterday brought to today so lightly!
(A yesterday I find almost impossible to lift.)

2006 Poem: "Evening Hawk" (Robert Penn Warren)

Prompt: Read the following poem carefully. Then write a well-organized essay in which you analyze how the poet uses language to describe the scene and to convey mood and meaning.

Evening Hawk by Robert Penn Warren

From plane of light to plane, wings dipping through
Geometries and orchids that the sunset builds,
Out of the peak's black angularity of shadow, riding
The last tumultuous avalanche of
5 Light above pines and the guttural gorge,
The hawk comes.

His wing
Scythes down another day, his motion
Is that of the honed steel-edge, we hear
10 The crashless fall of stalks of Time.

The head of each stalk is heavy with the gold of our error.

Look! Look! he is climbing the last light
Who knows neither Time nor error, and under
Whose eye, unforgiving, the world, unforgiven, swings
15 Into shadow.

Long now,
The last thrush is still, the last bat
Now cruises in his sharp hieroglyphics. His wisdom
Is ancient, too, and immense. The star
20 Is steady, like Plato, over the mountain.

If there were no wind we might, we think, hear
The earth grind on its axis, or history
Drip in darkness like a leaking pipe in the cellar.

2006B Poem: "To Paint a Water Lily" (Ted Hughes)

Prompt: Read the following poem carefully. Then write an essay discussing how the poet uses literary techniques to reveal the speaker's attitudes toward nature and the artist's task.

To Paint a Water Lily by Ted Hughes

A green level of lily leaves
Roofs the pond's chamber and paves

The flies' furious arena: study
These, the two minds of this lady.

5 First observe the air's dragonfly
That eats meat, that bullets by

Or stands in space to take aim;
Others as dangerous comb the hum

10 Under the trees. There are battle-shouts
And death-cries everywhere hereabouts

But inaudible, so the eyes praise
To see the colours of these flies

Rainbow their arcs, spark, or settle
Cooling like beads of molten metal

15 Through the spectrum. Think what worse
is the pond-bed's matter of course;

Prehistoric bedragoned times
Crawl that darkness with Latin names,

20 Have evolved no improvements there,
Jaws for heads, the set stare,

Ignorant of age as of hour—
Now paint the long-necked lily-flower

Which, deep in both worlds, can be still
As a painting, trembling hardly at all

25 Though the dragonfly alight,
Whatever horror nudge her root.

2007 Poems: “A Barred Owl” (Richard Wilbur) and “The History Teacher” (Billy Collins)
Prompt: In the following two poems, adults provide explanations for children. Read the poems carefully. Then write an essay in which you compare and contrast the two poems, analyzing how each poet uses literary devices to make his point.

A Barred Owl by Richard Wilbur

The warping night-air having brought the boom
Of an owl's voice into her darkened room,
We tell the wakened child that all she heard
Was an odd question from a forest bird,
5 Asking of us, if rightly listened to,
“Who cooks for you?” and then “Who cooks for you?”

Words, which can make our terrors bravely clear,
Can also thus domesticate a fear,
And send a small child back to sleep at night
10 Not listening for the sound of stealthy flight
Or dreaming of some small thing in a claw
Borne up to some dark branch and eaten raw.

The History Teacher by Billy Collins

Trying to protect his students' innocence
he told them the Ice Age was really just
the Chilly Age, a period of a million years
when everyone had to wear sweaters.

5 And the Stone Age became the Gravel Age,
named after the long driveways of the time.

The Spanish Inquisition was nothing more
than an outbreak of questions such as
“How far is it from here to Madrid?”
10 “What do you call the matador's hat?”

The War of the Roses took place in a garden,
and the Enola Gay dropped one tiny atom on Japan.

The children would leave his classroom
for the playground to torment the weak
and the smart,
15 mussing up their hair and breaking their glasses,

while he gathered up his notes and walked home
past flower beds and white picket fences,
wondering if they would believe that soldiers
20 in the Boer War told long, rambling stories
designed to make the enemy nod off.

2007B Poem: "Here" (Philip Larkin)

Prompt: Read the following poem carefully. Then, write a well-organized essay in which you analyze the techniques the poet uses to convey his attitude toward the places he describes.

Here by Philip Larkin

Swerving east, from rich industrial shadows
And traffic all night north; swerving through fields
Too thin and thistled to be called meadows,
And now and then a harsh-named halt, that shields
5 Workmen at dawn; swerving to solitude
Of skies and scarecrows, haystacks, hares and pheasants,
And the widening river's slow presence,
The piled gold clouds, the shining gull-marked mud.

Gathers to the surprise of town:
10 Here domes and statues, spires and cranes cluster
Beside grain-scattered streets, barge-crowded water,
And residents from raw estates, brought down
The dead straight miles by stealing flat-faced trolleys,
Push through plate-glass swing doors to their desires –
15 Cheap suits, red kitchen-ware, sharp shoes, iced lollies,
Electric mixers, toasters, washers, driers –

A cut-price crowd, urban yet simple, dwelling
Where only salesmen and relations come
Within a terminate and relations come
20 Pastoral of ships up streets, the slave museum,
Tattoo-shops, consulates, grim head-scarfed wives;
And out beyond its mortgaged half-built edges
Fast-shadowed wheat-fields, running high as hedges,
Isolate villages, where removed lives

Loneliness clarifies. Here silence stands
Like heat. Here leaves unnoticed thicken,
Hidden weeds flower, neglected waters quicken,
Luminously-peopled air ascends;
And past the poppies bluish neutral distance
30 Ends the land suddenly beyond a beach
Of shapes and shingle. Here is unfenced existence:
Facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach.

2008 Poems: “When I Have Fears” (John Keats) and “Mezzo Cammin” (Henry W. Longfellow)

Prompt: In the two poems below, Keats and Longfellow reflect on similar concerns. Read the poems carefully. Then write an essay in which you compare and contrast the two poems, analyzing the poetic techniques each writer uses to explore his particular situation.

When I Have Fears

When I have fears that I may cease to be
 Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain,
Before high-piled books, in charactery,
 Hold like rich garners the full ripen'd grain;
5 When I behold, upon the night's starr'd face,
 Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,
And think that I may never live to trace
 Their shadows, with the magic hand of chance;
And when I feel, fair creature of an hour,
10 That I shall never look upon thee more,
Never have relish in the faery power
 Of unreflecting love; - then on the shore
Of the wide world I stand alone, and think
Till love and fame to nothingness do sink.

1818 ---John Keats (1795-1821)

Mezzo Cammin¹

**Written at Boppard on the Rhine August 25, 1842,
Just Before Leaving Home**

Half my life is gone, and I have let
 The years slip from me and have not fulfilled
 The aspiration of my youth, to build
 Some tower of song with lofty parapet.
5 Not indolence, nor pleasure, nor the fret
 Of restless passions that would not be stilled,
 But sorrow, and a care that almost killed,
 Kept me from what I may accomplish yet;
Though, half-way up the hill, I see the Past
19 Lying beneath me with its sounds and sights,--
 A city in the twilight dim and vast,
With smoking roofs, soft bells, and gleaming lights,--
 And hear above me on the autumnal blast
The cataract² of Death far thundering from the heights.

1842 --Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882)

¹ The title is from the first line of Dante's Divine Comedy: “Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita” (“Midway upon the journey of our life”).

² A large waterfall

2008B Poems: “Hawk Roosting” (Ted Hughes) and “Golden Retrievals” (Mark Doty)
Prompt: The following two poems present animal-eye views of the world. Read each poem carefully. Then write an essay in which you analyze the techniques used in the poems to characterize the speakers and convey differing views of the world.

HAWK ROOSTING

I sit in the top of the wood, my eyes closed.
Inaction, no falsifying dream
Between my hooked head and hooked feet:
Or in sleep rehearse perfect kills and eat.

5 The convenience of the high trees!
The air's buoyancy and the sun's ray
Are of advantage to me;
And the earth's face upward for my inspection.

My feet are locked upon the rough bark.
10 It took the whole of Creation
To produce my foot, my each feather:
Now I hold Creation in my foot

Or fly up, and revolve it all slowly -
I kill where I please because it is all mine.
15 There is no sophistry in my body:
My manners are tearing off heads -

The allotment of death.
For the one path of my flight is direct
Through the bones of the living.
20 No arguments assert my right:

The sun is behind me.
Nothing has changed since I began.
My eye has permitted no change.
I am going to keep things like this.

-- Ted Hughes

GOLDEN RETRIEVALS

Fetch? Balls and sticks capture my attention
seconds at a time. Catch? I don't think so.
Bunny, tumbling leaf, a squirrel who's—oh
joy—actually scared. Sniff the wind, then

5 I'm off again: muck, pond, ditch, residue
of any thrillingly dead thing. And you?
Either you're sunk in the past, half our walk,
thinking of what you never can bring back,

or else you're off in some fog concerning
10 —tomorrow, is that what you call it? My work:
to unsnare time's warp (and woof!), retrieving,
my haze-headed friend, you. This shining bark,

a Zen master's bronzy gong, calls you here,
entirely, now: bow-wow, bow-wow, bow-wow.

-- Mark Doty

2009 Speech from *Henry VIII* (William Shakespeare)

Prompt: In the following speech from Shakespeare's play *Henry VIII*, Cardinal Wolsey considers his sudden downfall from his position as advisor to the king. Spokesmen for the king have just left Wolsey alone on stage. Read the speech carefully. Then write a well-organized essay in which you analyze how Shakespeare uses elements such as allusion, figurative language, and tone to convey Wolsey's complex response to his dismissal from court.

So farewell—to the little good you bear me.
Farewell? a long farewell to all my greatness!
This is the state of man: to-day he puts forth
The tender leaves of hopes, to-morrow blossoms,
5 And bears his blushing honors thick upon him;
The third day comes a frost, a killing frost,
And when he thinks, good easy man, full surely
His greatness is a-ripening, nips his root,
And then he falls as I do. I have ventur'd,
10 Like little wanton boys that swim on bladders,¹
This many summers in a sea of glory,
But far beyond my depth. My high-blown pride
At length broke under me, and now has left me,
Weary and old with service, to the mercy
15 Of a rude stream that must for ever hide me.
Vain pomp and glory of this world, I hate ye!
I feel my heart new open'd. O how wretched
Is that poor man that hangs on princes' favors!
There is, betwixt that smile we would aspire to,
20 That sweet aspect of princes, and their ruin,
More pangs and fears than wars or women have;
And when he falls, he falls like Lucifer;²
Never to hope again.

¹ air-filled sacs

² Satan, the fallen angel

2009B Poem: "Icarus" (Edward Field)

Prompt: The following poem, written by Edward Field, makes use of the Greek myth of Daedalus and Icarus.* Read the poem carefully. Then write an essay in which you analyze how Field employs literary devices in adapting the Icarus myth to a contemporary setting.

Icarus

Only the feathers floating around the hat
Showed that anything more spectacular had occurred
Than the usual drowning. The police preferred to ignore
The confusing aspects of the case,
5 And the witnesses ran off to a gang war.
So the report filed and forgotten in the archives read simply
"Drowned," but it was wrong: Icarus
Had swum away, coming at last to the city
Where he rented a house and tended the garden.
10 "That nice Mr. Hicks" the neighbors called him,
Never dreaming that the gray, respectable suit
Concealed arms that had controlled huge wings
Nor that those sad, defeated eyes had once
Compelled the sun. And had he told them
15 They would have answered with a shocked, uncomprehending stare.
No, he could not disturb their neat front yards;
Yet all his books insisted that this was a horrible mistake:
What was he doing aging in a suburb?
Can the genius of the hero fall
20 To the middling stature of the merely talented?
And nightly Icarus probes his wound
And daily in his workshop, curtains carefully drawn,
Constructs small wings and tries to fly
To the lighting fixture on the ceiling:
25 Fails every time and hates himself for trying.
He had thought himself a hero, had acted heroically,
And dreamt of his fall, the tragic fall of the hero;
But now rides commuter trains,
Serves on various committees,
30 And wishes he had drowned.

* Daedalus and his son, Icarus, fashioned wings of feathers and wax in an attempt to escape from prison by flying across the sea. Before their flight, Daedalus warned his son not to fly too close to the sun. But, caught up in the experience of flying, Icarus ignored the warning and soared upward. The heat of the sun melted the wax, the wings fell off, and he plunged to his death in the sea

2010 Poem: "The Century Quilt" (Marilyn Nelson Waniek)

Prompt: Read carefully the following poem by Marilyn Nelson Waniek. Then write an essay analyzing how Waniek uses literary techniques to develop the complex meanings that the speaker attributes to The Century Quilt. You may wish to consider such elements as structure, imagery, and tone.

The Century Quilt
for Sarah Mary Taylor, Quilter

My sister and I were in love
with Meema's Indian blanket.
We fell asleep under army green
issued to Daddy by Supply.
5 When Meema came to live with us
she brought her medicines, her cane,
and the blanket I found on my sister's bed
the last time I visited her.
I remembered how I'd planned to inherit
10 that blanket, how we used to wrap ourselves
at play in its folds and be chieftains
and princesses.

Now I've found a quilt
I'd like to die under;
15 Six Van Dyke brown squares,
two white ones, and one square
the yellowbrown of Mama's cheeks.
Each square holds a sweet gum leaf
whose fingers I imagine
20 would caress me into the silence.

I think I'd have good dreams
for a hundred years under this quilt,
as Meema must have, under her blanket,
dreamed she was a girl again in Kentucky
25 among her yellow sisters,
their grandfather's white family
nodding at them when they met.
When their father came home from his store
they cranked up the pianola
30 and all of the beautiful sisters
giggled and danced.
She must have dreamed about Mama
when the dancing was over:
lanky girl trailing after her father
35 through his Oklahoma field.
Perhaps under this quilt
I'd dream of myself,
of my childhood of miracles,
of my father's burnt umber pride,
40 my mother's ochre gentleness.
Within the dream of myself
perhaps I'd meet my son
or my other child, as yet unconceived.
I'd call it The Century Quilt,
45 after its pattern of leaves.

¹A quilt is a type of bedcovering often made by stitching together varied pieces of fabric.

²Burnt umber is a shade of brown.

³Ochre refers to a shade of yellow.

2010B Poems: “To Sir John Lade, on His Coming of Age” (Samuel Johnson) and “When I Was One-and-Twenty” (A. E. Housman)

Prompt: Each of the two poems below is concerned with a young man at the age of twenty-one, traditionally the age of adulthood. Read the two poems carefully. Then write a well-organized essay in which you compare and contrast the poems, analyzing the poetic techniques, such as point of view and tone, that each writer uses to make his point about coming of age.

To Sir John Lade, on His Coming of Age
(‘A Short Song of Congratulation’)

Long-expected one and twenty
Lingering year at last is flown,
Pomp and pleasure, pride and plenty,
Great Sir John, are all your own.

5 Loosened from the minor’s tether,
Free to mortgage or to sell,
Wild as wind, and light as feather,
Bid the slaves of thrift farewell.

10 Call the Bettys, Kates, and Jennys,
Every name that laughs at care,
Lavish of your grandsire’s guineas,
Show the spirit of an heir.

All that prey on vice and folly
Joy to see their quarry fly,

15 Here the gamester light and jolly,
There the lender grave and sly.

Wealth, Sir John, was made to wander,
Let it wander as it will;
See the jockey, see the pander,

20 Bid them come, and take their fill.

When the bonny blade carouses,
Pockets full, and spirits high,
What are acres? What are houses?
Only dirt, or wet or dry.

25 If the guardian or the mother
Tell the woes of wilful waste,
Scorn their counsel and their pother,*
You can hang or drown at last.

1780 — Samuel Johnson (1709–1784)

- fuss

When I Was One-and-Twenty

When I was one-and-twenty
I heard a wise man say,
‘Give crowns and pounds and guineas
But not your heart away;
5 Give pearls away and rubies
But keep your fancy free.’
But I was one-and-twenty,
No use to talk to me.

When I was one-and-twenty
10 I heard him say again,
‘The heart out of the bosom
Was never given in vain;
’Tis paid with sighs a plenty
And sold for endless rue.’
15 And I am two-and-twenty,
And oh, ’tis true, ’tis true.

1896 — A. E. Housman (1859–1936)

2011 Poem: "An Echo Sonnet" (Robert Pack)

Prompt: Read carefully the following poem by Robert Pack, paying close attention to the relationship between form and meaning. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how the literary techniques used in this poem contribute to its meaning.

AN ECHO SONNET
To an Empty Page

	Voice:	Echo:
	How from emptiness can I make a start?	Start
	And starting, must I master joy or grief?	Grief
	But is there consolation in the heart?	Art
	Oh cold reprieve, where's natural relief?	Leaf
5	Leaf blooms, burns red before delighted eyes.	Dies
	Here beauty makes of dying, ecstasy.	See
	Yet what's the end of our life's long disease?	Ease
	If death is not, who is my enemy?	Me
	Then are you glad that I must end in sleep?	Leap
10	I'd leap into the dark if dark were true.	True
	And in that night would you rejoice or weep?	Weep
	What contradiction makes you take this view?	You
	I feel your calling leads me where I go.	Go
	But whether happiness is there, you know.	No

2011B Poem: "A Story" (Li-Young Lee)

Prompt: The following poem is by the contemporary poet Li-Young Lee. Read the poem carefully. Then write a well-developed essay in which you analyze how the poet conveys the complex relationship of the father and the son through the use of literary devices such as point of view and structure.

A Story

Sad is the man who is asked for a story
and can't come up with one.

His five-year-old son waits in his lap.
Not the same story, Baba. A new one.

5 The man rubs his chin, scratches his ear.

In a room full of books in a world
of stories, he can recall
not one, and soon, he thinks, the boy
will give up on his father.

10 Already the man lives far ahead, he sees
the day this boy will go. *Don't go!*
Hear the alligator story! The angel story once more!
You love the spider story. You laugh at the spider.
Let me tell it!

15 But the boy is packing his shirts,
he is looking for his keys. *Are you a god,*
the man screams, *that I sit mute before you?*
Am I a god that I should never disappoint?

20 But the boy is here. *Please, Baba, a story?*
It is an emotional rather than logical equation,
an earthly rather than heavenly one,
which posits that a boy's supplications
and a father's love add up to silence.

Li-Young Lee, "A Story" from *The City in Which I Love You*.

2012 Poem: “Thou Blind Man’s Mark” (Sir Philip Sidney)

Prompt: In the following poem by Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586), the speaker addresses the subject of desire. Read the poem carefully. Then write a well-developed essay in which you analyze how poetic devices help to convey the speaker’s complex attitude toward desire.

Thou Blind Man’s Mark

Thou blind man’s mark,¹ thou fool’s self-chosen snare,
Fond fancy’s scum, and dregs of scattered thought;
Band of all evils, cradle of causeless care;
Thou web of will, whose end is never wrought;
5 Desire, desire! I have too dearly bought,
With price of mangled mind, thy worthless ware;
Too long, too long, asleep thou hast me brought,
Who should my mind to higher things prepare.
But yet in vain thou hast my ruin sought;
10 In vain thou madest me to vain things aspire;
In vain thou kindlest all thy smoky fire;
For virtue hath this better lesson taught—
Within myself to seek my only hire,²
Desiring naught but how to kill desire.

¹ target

² reward

2013 Poem: "The Black Walnut Tree" by Mary Oliver

Prompt: Carefully read the following poem by Mary Oliver. Then write a well-organized essay in which you analyze how Oliver conveys the relationship between the tree and family through the use of figurative language and other poetic techniques.

The Black Walnut Tree by Mary Oliver

My mother and I debate:
we could sell
the black walnut tree
to the lumberman,
5 and pay off the mortgage.
Likely some storm anyway
will churn down its dark boughs,
smashing the house. We talk
slowly, two women trying
10 in a difficult time to be wise.
Roots in the cellar drains,
I say, and she replies
that the leaves are getting heavier
every year, and the fruit
15 harder to gather away.
But something brighter than money
moves in our blood -- an edge
sharp and quick as a trowel
that wants us to dig and sow.
20 So we talk, but we don't do
anything. That night I dream
of my fathers out of Bohemia
filling the blue fields
of fresh and generous Ohio
25 with leaves and vines and orchards.
What my mother and I both know
is that we'd crawl with shame
in the emptiness we'd made
in our own and our fathers' backyard.
30 So the black walnut tree
swings through another year
of sun and leaping winds,
of leaves and bounding fruit,
and, month after month, the whip-
35 crack of the mortgage.

2014 Poem: “For That He Looked Not upon Her” by George Gascoigne

Prompt: The following poem is by the sixteenth-century English poet George Gascoigne. Read the poem carefully. Then write an essay in which you analyze how the complex attitude of the speaker is developed through such devices as form, diction, and imagery.

For That He Looked Not upon Her

You must not wonder, though you think it strange,
To see me hold my louring¹ head so low;
And that mine eyes take no delight to range
About the gleams which on your face do grow.
5 The mouse which once hath broken out of trap
Is seldom 'ticèd² with the trustless bait,
But lies aloof for fear of more mishap,
And feedeth still in doubt of deep deceit.
10 The scorched fly which once hath 'scaped the flame
Will hardly come to play again with fire,
Whereby I learn that grievous is the game
Which follows fancy dazzled by desire:
So that I wink or else hold down my head,
Because your blazing eyes my bale³ have bred.
(1573)

¹ gloomy

² enticed

³ misery

2015 Poem: "XIV" (Derek Walcott)

Prompt: In the following poem by Caribbean writer Derek Walcott, the speaker recalls a childhood experience of visiting an elderly woman storyteller. Read the poem carefully. Then, in a well-developed essay, discuss the speaker's recollection and analyze how Walcott uses poetic devices to convey the significance of the experience.

XIV

With the frenzy of an old snake shedding its skin,
the speckled road, scored with ruts, smelling of mold,
twisted on itself and reentered the forest
where the dasheen¹ leaves thicken and folk stories begin.
5 Sunset would threaten us as we climbed closer
to her house up the asphalt hill road, whose yam vines
wrangled over gutters with the dark reek of moss,
the shutters closing like the eyelids of that mimosa²
called Ti-Marie; then—lucent as paper lanterns,
10 lamplight glowed through the ribs, house after house—
there was her own lamp at the black twist of the path.
There's childhood, and there's childhood's aftermath.
She began to remember at the minute of the fireflies,
to the sound of pipe water banging in kerosene tins,
15 stories she told to my brother and myself.
Her leaves were the libraries of the Caribbean.
The luck that was ours, those fragrant origins!
Her head was magnificent, Sidone. In the gully of her voice
shadows stood up and walked, her voice travels my shelves.
She was the lamplight in the stare of two mesmerized boys
still joined in one shadow, indivisible twins.

¹ dasheen: tropical plant with large leaves

² mimosa: tropical plant whose leaves close or droop when touched or shaken

2016 Poem: "The Juggler" (Richard Wilbur)

Prompt: Read carefully the following poem by Richard Wilbur, first published in 1949. Then, write an essay in which you analyze how the speaker describes the juggler and what that description reveals about the speaker. You may wish to consider poetic elements such as imagery, figurative language, and tone.

The Juggler

A ball will bounce, but less and less. It's not
A light-hearted thing, resents its own resilience.
Falling is what it loves, and the earth falls
So in our hearts from brilliance,
5 Settles and is forgot.
It takes a sky-blue juggler with five red balls

To shake our gravity up. Whee, in the air
The balls roll round, wheel on his wheeling hands,
Learning the ways of lightness, alter to spheres
10 Grazing his finger ends,
Cling to their courses there,
Swinging a small heaven about his ears.

But a heaven is easier made of nothing at all
Than the earth regained, and still and sole within
15 The spin of worlds, with a gesture sure and noble
He reels that heaven in,
Landing it ball by ball,
And trades it all for a broom, a plate, a table.

Oh, on his toe the table is turning, the broom's
20 Balancing up on his nose, and the plate whirls
On the tip of the broom! Damn, what a show, we cry:
The boys stamp, and the girls
Shriek, and the drum booms
And all comes down, and he bows and says good-bye.

25 If the juggler is tired now, if the broom stands
In the dust again, if the table starts to drop
Through the daily dark again, and though the plate
Lies flat on the table top,
For him we batter our hands
30 Who has won for once over the world's weight.

From *Ceremony and Other Poems (1950)*
in Richard Wilbur, *New and Collected Poems*,
New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988

2017 Poem: "The Myth of Music" (Rachel M. Harper)

Prompt: The following poem is by Rachel M. Harper. Read the poem carefully. Then, considering such elements as imagery, form, and tone, write a well-organized essay in which you analyze the relationship between music and the speaker's complex memories of her family.

The Myth of Music
for my father

5 If music can be passed on
like brown eyes or a strong
left hook. this melody
is my inheritance, lineage traced
through a title track,
displayed on an album cover
that you pin to the wall
as art, oral history taught
on a record player, the lessons
sealed in the grooves like fact.
10 This is the only myth I know.
I sit on the hardwood
floors of a damp November,
my brother dealing cards
from an incomplete deck,
15 and I don't realize that this
moment is the definition
of family, collective memory
cut in rough-textured tones,
the voice of a horn so familiar
20 I don't know I'm listening,
Don't know I'm singing,
a child's improvisation
of *Giant Steps* or *Impressions*:¹
25 songs without lyrics
can still be sung.

30 In six months, when my mother
is 2,000 miles away, deciding
if she wants to come home,
I will have forgotten
this moment, the security
of her footsteps, the warmth

35 of a radiator on my back and you
present in the sound of typing
your own accompaniment,
multiphonics disguised as chords
in a distant room, speakers set
on high to fill the whole house
with your spirit, your call
40 as a declaration of love.

45 But the music will remain.
The timeless notes of jazz
too personal to play out loud,
stay locked in the rhythm
of my childhood, memories fading
like the words of a lullaby,
come to life in a saxophone's blow.
They lie when they say
music is universal—this is my song,
50 the notes like fingerprints
as delicate as breath.
I will not share this air
with anyone
but you.

¹*Giant Steps* is a jazz album (1960) by John Coltrane. *Impressions* (1963) is another album by Coltrane.

2018 Poem: "Plants" (Olive Senior)

Prompt: Carefully read Olive Senior's poem, "Plants." Then, in a well-organized essay, analyze how the poet portrays the complex relationships among the speaker, the implied audience, and plant life. You may wish to consider the author's use of such literary techniques as syntax, diction, and figurative language.

Plants

Plants are deceptive. You see them there
looking as if once rooted they know
their places; not like animals, like us
always running around, leaving traces.

5 Yet from the way they breed (excuse me!)
and twine, from their exhibitionist
and rather prolific nature, we must infer
a sinister not to say imperialistic

grand design. Perhaps you've regarded,
10 as beneath your notice, armies of mangrove
on the march, roots in the air, clinging
tendrils anchoring themselves everywhere?

The world is full of shoots bent on conquest,
invasive seedlings seeking wide open spaces,
15 matériel gathered for explosive dispersal
in capsules and seed cases.

Maybe you haven't quite taken in the
colonizing ambitions of hitchhiking
burrs on your sweater, surf-riding nuts
20 bobbing on ocean, parachuting seeds and other

airborne traffic dropping in. And what
about those special agents called flowers?
Dressed, perfumed,, and made-up for romancing
insects, bats, birds, bees, even you—

25 —don't deny it, my dear, I've seen you
sniff and exclaim. Believe me, Innocent,
that sweet fruit, that berry, is nothing
more than ovary, the instrument to seduce

you into scattering plant progeny. Part of
30 a vast cosmic program that once set
in motion cannot be undone though we
become plant food and earth wind down.

They'll outlast us, they were always there
one step ahead of us: plants gone to seed,
35 generating the original profligate,
extravagant, reckless, improvident, weed.

Originally published in *Gardening in the Tropics*
by Olive Senior.

2019 Poem: "The Landlady" (P. K. Page)

Prompt: Carefully read P. K. Page's 1943 poem "The Landlady." Then, in a well-organized essay, analyze the speaker's complex portrayal of the landlady. You may wish to consider such elements as imagery, selection of detail, and tone.

"The Landlady" by P. K. Page

Through sepia air the boarders* come and go,
impersonal as trains. Pass silently
the craving silence swallowing her speech;
click doors like shutters on her camera eye.

5 Because of her their lives become exact:
their entrances and exits are designed;
phone calls are cryptic. Oh, her ticklish ears
advance and fall back stunned.

10 Nothing is unprepared. They hold the walls
about them as they weep or laugh. Each face
is dialled to zero publicly. She peers
stippled with curious flesh;

15 pads on the patient landing like a pulse,
unlocks their keyholes with the wire of sight,
searches their rooms for clues when they are out,
pricks when they come home late.

20 Wonders when they are quiet, jumps when they move,
dreams that they dope or drink, trembles to know
the traffic of their brains, jaywalks their street
in clumsy shoes.

Yet knows them better than their closest friends;
their cupboards and the secrets of their drawers,
their books, their private mail, their photographs
are theirs and hers.

25 Knows when they wash, how frequently their clothes
go to the cleaners, what they like to eat,
their curvature of health, but even so
is not content.

30 And like a lover must know all, all, all,
Prays she may catch them unprepared at last
and palm the dreadful riddle of their skulls –
hoping the worst.

***boarders:** people who rent rooms in a private home.