AP Literature & Composition

The AP Lit. exam consists of 55 multiple choice questions on various poems and excerpts, and 3 essays (40 min each). The class consists of reading and writing about novels, plays, and poetry on a daily basis. Each week in AP lit. we will have timed writing assignments that test your ability to quickly comprehend a text and respond to it with thoughtful analysis and literary devices. While we will discuss how to collectively improve our writing for the AP exam, successful students should already possess a strong background in reading and writing.

Attached are examples of the three different types of prompts that you will be tested on throughout the year (poetry, excerpt, and open-ended), along with an exemplary student sample essay for each. You do not need to be at this level of writing to take the class, but your foundation prior to entering this class should be strong enough to get you here by the end of semester 1.

Q1

1. In Colleen McElroy's poem "Monologue for Saint Louis," published in 1980, the speaker returns to her childhood home in St. Louis, Missouri, after an extended absence and contemplates how she has changed. Read the poem carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how McElroy uses literary elements and techniques to convey the speaker's complex experience of returning home.

   In your response you should do the following:

   - Respond to the prompt with a thesis that presents a defensible interpretation.
   - Select and use evidence to support your line of reasoning.
   - Explain how the evidence supports your line of reasoning.
   - Use appropriate grammar and punctuation in communicating your argument.

Monologue for Saint Louis

home again and the heart barely there
when choked by clusters of words
thick as the clumps of blue-black
grapes we snitched every summer
Line 5 from the neighbor's arbor[1]
succulent pockets of flesh laced
with green staining our lips and fingers

it is summer again and I am home
vowing penance[2] for all my disappearances
10 since that first summer
when the arbor was clotted
with pockets of grapes latticed on each
interlocking vine

now earthworms have trellised the arbor
15 and that crumbling heap of rotting black
sticks cannot shield us from wind or words
we are the women we whispered about each summer
familiar houses and schoolyards have disappeared
childhood streets are blocked with singular black

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one-way signs aligned like a lacework
of warnings or accusing fingers
I am home again
and my cousins sit in their cloaks of black
skin dragging me through twisted vines
of genetic maps thick with childhood vows

they remember each summer
how each year I vowed to return home
forever but I am lost in a riddle of words
home is a vacant lot its back yard clotted
with a stainless-steel arch[3] and clusters
of tiny parks sprouting like trelliswork

enclosing some strange summer
resort my cousins have disappeared
into like the shadows of beasts and bad air
that infect this flat country and I am home
a stranger in love with words
with tart sweet clusters of poems

"Monologue for Saint Louis" from *Queen of the Ebony Isles* ©1984 by Colleen J. McElroy. Published by Wesleyan University Press.
Used with permission.

1: vining plants trained to grow over a lattice, framework, or trellis
2: an act that demonstrates regret and offers amends through self-sacrifice
3: the Gateway Arch, a 630-foot-tall arch located in a national park

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Sample

Q1

Sample 1A

In her poem, "Monologue for Saint Louis," Colleen McElroy uses vivid imagery and symbolism to create a sense of Nostalgia. By using the symbols of grapes and grapevines to juxtapose the warmth of childhood with the relative sterility of adulthood, McElroy explores the sacrifices one makes when they grow.

McElroy heavily utlizes anachronism to frame the speaker's narrative of St. Louis, each warm memory derived from childhood is balanced by a hollow adult experience. This is made clear immediately in the first stanza. When she returns home she rememebers the "succulent pockets of flesh laced [grapes] with green staining out lips and fingers." She concedes this warm memory by admitting that "the heart [was] barely there." The imagery of "succulent" grapes with rich "flesh" show the sunstantive nature of the grapes and therefore the substantive memory of childhood. The "staining" represents the everlasting impact that childhood leaves on people. These full and powerful memories being juxtaposed by an absent heart and the word "choked" show the magnitude of innocence the speaker feels she has lost. Moreover, the grapes are described as "blue-black", but the staining in "green" representing the archetypal truthes of life and nourishment associted with the color green. Her ageing shows the loss of this life and inner substance.

As McElroy continues, she leans into the grape metaphor to further exemplify the loss of her childhoof innocence. This temporal shift is clear in stanzas two and three. During the first summer, "the arbor was clotted with pockets of grapes latticed on each interlocking vine" but she concedes that this is no longer the case "now...that crubling heap of rotting black sticks cannot shield us." The speaker represents the departure from childhood through the death of the grapevine. The innocence and warth that has once acted as a "shield" now has been shattered by the assualts of time and adulthood. The jusxtaposition with the earlier "blue-black" and "green" characteristics of the grapes with the now completely "rotting black sticks" shows that the warmth of the grapes has been siphoned by the speaker's choice to leave her childhood home and only when she returns does she fully understand the constrast between her once fulfulling childhood and her sterile adult life.

McElroy builds on the significance of the speaker's return to her home town towards the end of the poem. She explores the broken promise of how "each year [the speaker] vowed to return home forever." It is only when the speaker does attempt to return that she realizes that shes going back to St. Louis *not* "home." The warmth of home has now been uprooted; it's a "vacant lot" with a "stainless-steel arch." She returns home to a "[infected] flat country." The use of words like "vacant," "flat," and "infect" show both the physical corruption of the city she called home and the internal corruption the speaker feels of her idea of home. Likewise, the use of "stainless-steel" describes the sterility that replaced the once fertile and luscious grapes. This epic juxtaposition from the begining of the poem with fertile grapes and warm feeling of summer shifts with the sterility, sickness, and death towards the end of the poem, showing that the transition from childhood to adulthood too, is as drastic.
The speaker chooses to sacrifice her warmth and her home when leaving and only does recognize the true prices of her departure when she returns to a completely transformed St.Louis.

Q2

2. The following excerpt is from Rachel Cusk's novel *The Bradshaw Variations*, published in 2008. This passage describes Thomas Bradshaw's morning interactions with members of his household. Read the passage carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how Cusk uses literary elements and techniques to develop a complex portrayal of Thomas.

   In your response you should do the following:

   - Respond to the prompt with a thesis that presents a defensible interpretation.
   - Select and use evidence to support your line of reasoning.
   - Explain how the evidence supports your line of reasoning.
   - Use appropriate grammar and punctuation in communicating your argument.

Par.

1 What is art? Thomas Bradshaw asks himself this question frequently. He does not yet know the answer. He used to believe art was a kind of pretending, but he doesn't think that any more. He uses the word *authenticity* to describe what he thinks now. Some things are artificial and some are authentic. It is easy to tell when something is artificial. The other is harder.

2 In the mornings he listens to music, to Bach or Schubert. He stands in the kitchen in his dressing gown. He waits for his wife and daughter to come downstairs. He is forty-one, the age when a life comes out of its own past like something out of a mould; and either it is solid, all of a piece, or it fails to hold its shape and disintegrates. The disintegration is not difficult to imagine. It is the solidity, the concrete form, that is mystifying. Disintegration does not involve questions of authenticity, but of a solid form the questions must be asked.

3 Mostly, in fact, it is the lodger[1] Olga who comes down first. He hears her tread on the stairs and doesn't recognise it: that is how, every day, he identifies her, by hearing her quiet, slightly plodding step and wondering who on earth it belongs to. She ducks her peroxided head at him, flashes her uncertain train-track smile. For six months now Olga has been embroiled in protracted dentistry. Beneath the metal braces her teeth are grey and disorderly. As a child her mother apparently never took her to the dentist. This was not out of neglect, Olga has told him. It was because Olga was frightened of going, and her mother couldn't bear her to be frightened, or to feel pain. She has told Thomas that she is saving up for a bridge and a set of caps. She has three different jobs and all the money goes on her teeth. She complains of the expense: in Poland the cost of dentistry is much lower. There, she could have all the work done—'All!' Olga repeats, making a chopping motion with her hand—for what she pays here for just one monthly visit.

4 These conversations do not entirely engage Thomas. When he talks to Olga he is both there and not there. He is waiting for Tonie[2] to come down, as the platform guard waits for the London train to come through. Tonie's appearances in the kitchen are brief. Like the train she stops, disgorging[3] activity, and then departs again. It is a matter of minutes, but he needs to be ready. He hears Olga—in some ways he even identifies himself with her, both of them platform dwellers—but when she speaks he cannot reciprocate. He is as though sealed behind glass. He wonders if she realises this, realises that she can see but not touch him. She drinks tea from a giant Garfield[4] mug and eats cereal, topping up the milk frequently from the plastic container that stands beside her bowl. He glimpses her bare, mushroom-coloured legs beneath the table, her feet clad in large soft slippers. He turns the music up a little: it is an offering, a form of explanation. He wants her to know that he is aware of his own limitations, of his failure to

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make anything of their conversations in the morning. Sometimes this failure appears to him as something intrinsic to time itself, as an inner force, like decay. They pass and are forgotten, these interludes in the kitchen. And yet they are always the same: he could stand here for a hundred years and still have much the same conversation with Olga. There are, it seems, limitless copies of this conversation, but it never goes anywhere or develops. By the same token, it never dies. It has no relationship to time. This may be because it lacks authenticity.

Excerpt from THE BRADSHAW VARIATIONS by Rachel Cusk. Copyright © 2009 and 2012 by Rachel Cusk, used by permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux and The Wylie Agency LLC. All rights reserved.

1: a person who rents a room in a house
2: his wife
3: pouring out, releasing
4: a cartoon cat

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Q2 Sample

Sample 2A

In the excerpt from *The Bradshaw Variations* by Rachel Cusk, Thomas Bradshaw struggles through his morning routine and reflects on the authenticity of his own life. Although Thomas is able to complete his daily tasks as usual, he feels no engagement and purpose by completing them, and feels that he has become something artificial in his middle age. Through the use of contrast between Thomas' reality and his philisophical musings, similes, and lack of dialogue, Cusk develops Thomas as a man struggling to understand his place in the world as he ages.

Throughout the passage, the focus frequently shifts between Thomas' reflections on authenticity in a person and descriptions of his morning routine, revealing that his inner life is filled with considerably more strife than it may seem from an outside perspective, such as Olga's. In the beginning of the passage, Thomas declares that "it is easy to tell when something is artificial", but it is more difficult to determine authenticity. Through this statement, he is unknowingly comparing this reflection to his perspective on himself- is Thomas artificial or authentic? He is unsure, and attempts to work this out as he proceeds through his morning. The legion of mundane details of his life follow these thoughts, contrasting the deep inner life seen just before. His interaction with Olga is filled with mindless prattle such as her dentistry woes and complaints of medical costs, which he feels unable to respond to. As he turns up the music, he returns to his thoughts as quickly as he left them before, again wondering how he has become stuck in "limitless copies" of these meetings in the kitchen. Where a typical person could navigate this interaction with ease, Thomas struggles to step outside of his feeling of enclosure and repetition within his regular life. He furthers this perspective by attempting to compare himself with other events, trying to find solace in his painful experiences.

Cusk also uses similes within Thomas' story as he tries to make sense of the detached nature of his life. He at first feels like his is the "platform guard [waiting] for the London train to come through", the train being his wife's morning appearance in his morning rituals, but also the arrival of some purpose or meaning he feels he is waiting for. He briefly connects himself to Olga through this simile, believing her to be a "platform dweller" as well, perhaps due to her endless chatter with no real purpose, but still cannot connect the apathy he feels. When he returns to his thoughts, Thomas then describes the feeling inside him as "like decay" or "an inner force", as something that he cannot escape. He feels that no matter his choices, he is unable to escape the life he has made for himself and become able to respond to Olga's superfluous friendliness. Thomas' outlook on his future is overwhelmingly negative, as decay is inevitable and unpreventable, just as he believes his apathy is as well. His emotional state is further developed through the structure of the passage itself.

There is no dialogue within the passage -- save a reenaction of Olga's dramatics -- an intentional choice by Cusk to further alienate Thomas' perspective. The retelling of his morning events is quite objective, lacking the personality and humanity that telling the story through actual dialogue would provide. Thomas experiences his days like the structure of the passage, as though he was not being spoken to and was rather receiving the information "sealed behind glass". He fails to legitimately connect to the world around him, leading him to reflect again on the authenticity of his own being. He comes to the conclusion that he cannot be authentic due to the endless loop of his life, despite his possession of a cool exterior and solid form of a person. Through these contrasts, structural choices, and similes,

Cusk forms a complex portrayal of Thomas' inner life as a constant cycle of mundanity and his deep desire to get out of it, despite his acknowledgement he will never be able to do so.

Q3

3. In many works of literature, characters may be significantly affected by memories of the past. A character may be inspired by the past, haunted by the past, unable to let go of the past, or motivated by the past to craft a better future.

   Either from your own reading or from the list below, choose a work of fiction in which a character is significantly affected by a memory. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how the impact of the memory on the character contributes to an interpretation of the work as a whole. Do not merely summarize the plot.

   In your response you should do the following:

   - Respond to the prompt with a thesis that presents a defensible interpretation.
   - Provide evidence to support your line of reasoning.
   - Explain how the evidence supports your line of reasoning.
   - Use appropriate grammar and punctuation in communicating your argument.

Afterlife
Annie John
Behold the Dreamers
Beloved
Big Fish
The Buried Giant
Ceremony
Crime and Punishment
A Doll's House
Dominicana
The English Patient
The Farming of Bones
Fences
A Gesture Life
The Glass Menagerie
The Importance of Being Earnest
Invisible Man
Jane Eyre
Kindred
Love Medicine
Macbeth
The Mayor of Casterbridge
Mrs. Dalloway
The Nickel Boys
Obasan
Of Mice and Men
On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous
Purple Hibiscus
The Scarlet Letter
The Secret History
The Sound and the Fury
A Tale of Two Cities
Washington Black
The Woman Warrior
Wuthering Heights
The Yellow Birds

STOP

END OF EXAM

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Q3 Sample

In Charles Dickens' novel *A Tale of Two Cities*, memories serve as an essential plot point for many of the characters. Memories and their impact on both the large and small fates of the characters weave through the narrative, pushing conflict and encouraging growth. In Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, the impact of memory is chiefly seen through the character of Dr. Manette, who portrays both the impact memories have on the individual and their reflections of the greater fate of Paris.

A Tale of Two Cities is chiefly a story of family and the strength to be found in relationships. The story begins with young Lucie Manette collecting her father, Dr. Manette, upon his release from prison not long before the beginning of the French Revolution. As Lucie cares for her father throughout the narrative, the theme of memory's impact becomes immediately apparent. Dr. Manette is portrayed as deeply traumatized and shattered by his experiences both before and during his prison sentence. His past haunts him throughout the story, manifesting in an obsession with shoe-making. While Dr. Manette's trauma takes a backseat role in the story to the trouble of his daughter and her family, Dickens nonetheless allows his personal growth to be a central topic of focus. Throughout Dr. Manette's life in the aftermath of his prison sentence, he struggles greatly. Even as he grows further and further away from the time that so harmed him, the ghosts of the memory continue to exist within him. This allows for Dickens to masterfully explore the effects memories can have on an individual, as he portrays these past recollections in their starkest, bleakest forms.

Dr. Manette's memories likewise serve as a stark mirror for the current state of Paris. Dr. Manette's mental illness ebs and flows with the social and political tide of France, as his memories are later shown to be connected to them. In this way, Dr. Manette serves as both a view of the individual struggles happening in France, and the grand ideas held within the country as a whole. Although Dr. Manette is initially portrayed as far removed from the conflict, Dickens eventually reveals his close ties to the start of the Revolution. In this way, Dickens shows Dr. Manette as less of an individual but more of a symbol, who reflects the pain and suffering of the people in France. He has been hurt and suffered great injustice, as is the same with the French citizens, and both parties find that a grand upheaval is needed to get their lives back. In this way, Dr. Manette represents the memories and suffering of all those in France, and how the ways of dealing with deep sorrow and traumatic memories can so greatly differ. Even as the story continues, and the people of France grow ever more violent and hostile, Dickens is careful to portray them as sympathetic. Dr. Manette, with his connections to the DeFarges, is just like the revolutionaries. He has suffered just as they have suffered, with the only difference coming from how each group decides to deal with their pain.

In conclusion, Dr. Manette in *A Tale of Two Cities* is a man haunted by his past, which comes to manifest in his present. Dickens both carefully explores the individual sufferings that come from traumatic memories, and the greater implications that trauma can have on a society. Dr. Manette provides a smaller-scale representation of the sorrow of an entire populace, allowing for the audience to connect with the struggles of the people of France, even as their actions are condemned. In this way, memory serves as a chief theme in Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, portrayed most notably through Dr. Manette, as his sufferings

explore not only the damage memories can have on an individual, but also the larger ramifications of trauma and its lasting impact on a society.