

AP LITERATURE OPEN RESPONSE QUESTIONS

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

2010: Palestinian American literary theorist and cultural critic Edward Said has written that “Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted.” Yet Said has also said that exile can become “a potent, even enriching” experience. Select a novel, play, or epic in which a character experiences such a rift and becomes cut off from “home,” whether that home is the character’s birthplace, family, homeland, or other special place. Then write an essay in which you analyze how the character’s experience with exile is both alienating and enriching, and how this experience illuminates the meaning of the work as a whole.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2001: One definition of madness is “mental delusion or the eccentric behavior arising from it.” But Emily Dickinson wrote Much Madness is divinest Sense--To a discerning Eye--Novelists and playwrights have often seen madness with a “discerning

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

2000: Many works of literature not readily identified with the mystery or detective story genre nonetheless involve the investigation of a mystery. In these works, the solution to the mystery may be less important than the knowledge gained in the process of its investigation. Choose a novel or play in which one or more of the characters confront a mystery. Then write an essay in which you identify the mystery and explain how the investigation illuminates the meaning of the work as a whole. Do not merely summarize the plot.

1999: The eighteenth-century British novelist Laurence Sterne wrote, “No body, but he who has felt it, can conceive what a plaguing thing it is to have a man’s mind torn asunder by two projects of equal strength, both obstinately pulling in a contrary direction at the same time.” From a novel or play choose a character (not necessarily the protagonist) whose mind is pulled in conflicting directions by two compelling desires, ambitions, obligations, or influences. Then, in a well-organized essay, identify each of the two conflicting forces and explain how this conflict within one character illuminates the meaning of the work as a whole. You may use one of the novels or plays listed below or another novel or play of similar literary quality.

1998: In his essay “Walking,” Henry David Thoreau offers the following assessment of literature: “In literature it is only the wild that attracts us. Dullness is but another name for tamedness. It is the uncivilized free and wild thinking in Hamlet and The Iliad, in all scriptures and mythologies, not learned in schools, that delights us. From the works you have studied in school, choose a novel, play, or epic poem that you may initially have thought was conventional and tame but that you now value for its “uncivilized free and wild thinking.” Write an essay in which you explain what constitutes its “uncivilized free and wild thinking” and how that thinking is central to the value of the work as a whole. Support your ideas with specific references to the work you choose.

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

1996: The British novelist Fay Weldon offers this observation about happy endings: “The writers, I do believe, who get the best and most lasting response from readers are the writers who offer a happy ending through moral development. By a happy ending, I do not mean mere fortunate events--a marriage or a last-minute rescue from death--but some kind of spiritual reassessment or moral reconciliation, even with the self, even at death.” Choose a novel or play that has the kind of ending Weldon describes. In a well-written essay, identify the “spiritual reassessment or moral reconciliation” evident in the ending and explain its significance in the work as a whole.

1995: Writers often highlight the values of a culture or a society by using characters who are alienated from that culture or society because of gender, race, class or creed. Choose a play or novel in which such a character plays a significant role and show how that character’s alienation reveals the surrounding society’s assumptions and moral values.

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

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

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

1991: Many plays and novels use contrasting places (for example, two countries, two cities or towns, two houses, or the land and the sea) to represent opposed forces or ideas that are central to the meaning of the work. Choose a novel or play that

contrasts two such places. Write an essay explaining how the places differ, what each place represents, and how their contrast contributes to the meaning of the work.

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

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

1988: Choose a distinguished novel or play in which some of the most significant events are mental or psychological: for example, awakenings, discoveries, and changes in consciousness. In a well-organized essay, describe how the author manages to give these internal events the sense of excitement, suspense, and climax usually associated with external actions. Do not merely summarize the plot.

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

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

1985: A critic has said that one important measure of a superior work of literature is its ability to produce in the reader a healthy confusion of pleasure and disquietude. Select a literary work that produces this "healthy confusion." Write an essay in which you explain the sources of the "pleasure and disquietude" experienced by the readers of the work and how this pairing contributes to the meaning of the work as a whole.

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

1983: From a novel or play of literary merit, select an important character who is a villain. Then, in a well-organized essay, analyze the nature of the character's villainy and show how it enhances meaning in the work.

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

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

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

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

1978: Choose an implausible or strikingly unrealistic incident or character in a work of fiction or drama of recognized literary merit. Write an essay that explains how the incident or character is related to the more realistic or plausible elements in the rest of the work, [and why the pairing of these elements contributes to the meaning as a whole.]

1977: In some novels and plays certain parallel or recurring events prove to be significant. In an essay, describe the major

similarities and differences in a sequence of parallel or recurring events in a novel or play and discuss the significance of such events.

1976: A character's attempt to recapture or to reject the past is important in many plays, novels, and poems. Choose a literary work in which a character views the past with such feelings as reverence, bitterness, or longing. Show with clear evidence from the work how the character's view of the past is used to develop a theme in the work.

1975: Unlike the novelist, the writer of a play does not use his own voice and only rarely uses a narrator's voice to guide the audience's responses to character and action. Select a play you have read and write an essay in which you explain the techniques the playwright uses to guide his audience's responses to the central characters and action. You might consider the effect on the audience of things like setting, the use of comparable and contrasting characters, and the characters' responses to each other. Support your argument with specific references to the play.

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

1973: An effective literary work does not merely stop or cease; it concludes. In the view of some critics, a work that does not provide the pleasure of significant "closure" has terminated with an artistic fault. A satisfactory ending is not, however, always conclusive in every sense; significant closure may require the reader to abide with or adjust to ambiguity and uncertainty. In a well-organized essay, discuss the ending of a novel or play of acknowledged literary merit. Explain precisely how and why the ending appropriately or inappropriately concludes the work. Do not merely summarize the plot.

1971: In retrospect, the reader often discovers that the first chapter of a novel introduces some of the major themes of the work. Write an essay about the first chapter of a novel in which you explain how the chapter functions to set forth major themes.

1968: In many plays, a character has a misconception of himself or his world. Destroying or perpetuating this illusion contributes to a central theme of the play. Choose a play with a major character to whom this statement applies and write an essay in which you consider the following points: what the character's illusion is and how it differs from reality as presented in the play and how the destruction or perpetuation of the illusion develops a theme of the play.

1966: An individual's struggle toward understanding and awareness is the traditional subject for the novelist. In an essay, apply this statement to one novel of literary merit. Organize your essay according to the following plan: 1) Compare the hero as we see him in an early scene with the hero as we see him in a scene near the end of the novel. 2) Describe the techniques that the author uses to reveal the new understanding and awareness that the hero has achieved.

1963: Character determines incident. Incident illustrates character. Write a well-organized essay evaluating this statement through a discussion of one character from each of two novels.

1959: All kinds of books have been attacked, suppressed, or disapproved of by authorities, groups or individuals. Select an important work which you admire and which you propose to defend against possible objections. In a well-organized essay, present reasons why the work might be attacked, and base your defense on a consideration of such matters as its language, the people in it, its mood and spirit, and consequently its artistic purpose and its value for the readers.

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

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