

## PAST 20 A.P. OPEN TOPICS

*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*  
*Hamlet: Prince of Denmark*  
*The Tragedy of Macbeth*

*Frankenstein: Or, the Modern Prometheus*  
*Heart of Darkness*  
*Nineteen Eighty-Four*

- Choose a distinguished novel or play in which some of the most significant events are mental or psychological; for example, awakenings, discoveries, 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 action. Do not merely summarize. (1988)
- 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. Base your essay on a work from the following list or choose another work of comparable merit that you know well. Analyze how important elements of the work you choose are "distorted" and explain how the distortions contribute to the effectiveness of the work. Avoid plot summary. (1989)
- Chose 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. Avoid plot summary. (1990)
- 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 play or novel that contrasts such places. Write an essay explaining how the places differ, what each represents, and how their contrast contributes to the meaning of the work. (1991)
- 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. (1992)
- *The truest 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. (1993)
- 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. Avoid plot summary. (1994)
- 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. Do not write on a poem, short story, or film. (1995)
- 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 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. (1996)

- Novels and plays often include scenes of weddings, funerals, parties, and other special 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. (1997)
- 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 tameness. 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 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. (1998)
- The eighteenth-century British novelist Lawrence Sterne wrote, "Nobody, 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, 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. (1999)
- Many works of literature not readily identified with 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. (2000)
- 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. (2001)
- 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. (2002)
- According to 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. (2003)
- 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. (2004)
- In Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899), protagonist Edna Pontellier is said to possess "that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions." In a novel or play that you have studied, identify a character who conforms outwardly while questioning inwardly. Then write an essay in which you analyze how this tension between outward conformity and inward questioning contributes to the meaning of the work. Avoid mere plot summary. (2005)