

PAST AP OPEN TOPICS

When we come to the end of a novel or play, a consistent mood should have been created and our consciousness of certain aspects of life should have been intensified or even altered. Discuss the mood (tone) of two novels or plays you have read and point out the ways in which the story intensified your consciousness of certain aspects of life (made you more keenly aware of realities) or altered your views of certain aspects of life.

As a comic playwright I must forever caution my actors that what they do on stage, however absurd, must be done with complete seriousness. Except in the wildest farce, the characters and their problems must seem real to the audience if the audience is to discover and be moved by the inner serious truths for which the laughing is the vehicle.-William Bainbridge
In a carefully constructed essay, show how the fun of comedy is directly related to issues which are essentially serious. You should support your statements by specific references to at least three literary works, and you may use scenes and passages from fiction, drama, and poetry.

In many plays and novels, minor characters contribute significantly to the total work. They often have particular functions, e.g. as instruments in the plot, foils for the main characters, commentators on the theme and action, and the like. Write a well-organized essay showing how three minor characters function in the works in which they appear.

Many literary works criticize man or society for a failure to live up to an ideal. Sometimes it is established in a character or in action. Sometimes it is established indirectly when the author shows us the distortion men have accepted in its place. Choose one work in which such failures are presented and write an essay in which you explain how the author establishes the ideal and criticizes the failure to live up to it.

The central character in a novel or play often encounters moral, physical, or psychological danger. From a novel or play select a situation (episode or scene) in which the central character encounters danger. In a unified essay describe:

- (a) how the situation reveals character
- (b) how the revelation of character in this situation relates to the structure and meaning of the work.

Comedy, in a sense, is not less serious than tragedy. Where tragedy shows us the god-like qualities of man, comedy shows us his humanity. Tragedy is personal; comedy is social. In a unified essay examine the validity of this statement. To substantiate your argument, use specific illustrations from TWO plays of literary merit, one a comedy and one a tragedy. Do not merely summarize the plots.

Choose a work of recognized literary merit in which a specific inanimate object (e.g., a seashell, a handkerchief, a painting) is important, and write an essay in which you show how two or three of the purposes the object serves are related to another. In your essay do not merely summarize plot.

In some novels and plays the experiences of an important character change him; in others the experiences of an important character leave him almost unchanged. In an essay, apply this statement to a novel or play by one of the authors listed below or by an author of comparable literary excellence. Consider why the character has or has not been changed. Do not merely describe the character or summarize the plot.

Setting is the physical environment in which action occurs. It includes time and place. In many novels and plays, setting is used significantly. For example, the author may employ it as a motivating force in human behavior, as a reflection of the state of mind of character, or as a representation of the values held by character. Choose a novel or play in which the setting is important and write an essay in which you explain the uses the author makes of it.

Frequently, in works of fiction (novels, plays, narrative poems) an important character violated the law, the conventions, the rules of conduct of a society. In presenting such characters and actions, an author's purpose may be:

- (a) To assure our sympathy for the character who is violating the rules of society;
- (b) To divide our interest sharply between sympathy for the character and our desire to support the principles of society;
- (c) To arouse our "satiric mirth" at the character who is violating the principles of society;
- (d) To laugh with the character at the conventions that are being violated.

Write a well-organized essay, illustrating in some detail two or more of these purposes. Choose your illustrations from a work of recognized literary merit.

The struggle to achieve dominance over others frequently appears in fiction. Choose a novel in which such a struggle for dominance occurs, and write an essay showing for what purposes the author uses the struggle. Do not merely retell plot.

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 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 an essay, discuss

the ending of a novel or play of acknowledges literary merit. Explain precisely how and why the ending appropriately or inappropriately concludes the work. Do not merely summarize plot.

The significance of a title such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is easy to discover. However, in other works (for example, *Measure for Measure*) the full significance of the title becomes apparent to the reader only gradually. Choose two works and show how the significance of their respective titles is developed through the author's use of devices such as contrast, allusion, repetition, and point of view.

Select a line 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 passage, explain its relationship to the work in which it is found, and analyze the reasons for its effectiveness.

Choose a character from a work of recognized literary merit and write an essay in which you (a) briefly describe the standards of the fictional society in which the character exists and (b) show how the character is affected by and responds to these standards. Do not merely summarize the plot.

Although literary critics have tended to praise the unique in literary characterization, many authors have employed the stereotyped character successfully. Select one work of acknowledged literary merit and, in a well-written essay, show how the conventional or stereotyped character or characters function to achieve the author's purpose.

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 1987 (please use this year). 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.

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 work of literary merit 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.

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 individual and society. Do not merely summarize the plot.

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. (1959)

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. (1963)

An individual's struggle toward understanding and awareness and understanding is a 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:

- (a) 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.
- (b) Describe the techniques that the author uses to reveal the new understanding and awareness the hero has achieved.

Do not merely summarize the plot. Be specific in your illustrations. (1966)

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: A.) What the character's illusion is and how it differs from reality as presented in the play. B.) How the destruction or perpetuation of the illusion develops a theme of the play.

Do not merely retell the story. (1968)

In retrospect, the reader often discovers that the first chapter of a novel or the opening scene of a drama introduces some of the major themes of the work. Write an essay about the opening scene of a drama or the first chapter of a novel in which you explain how it functions in this way. (1971)

Unlike the novelist, the writer of play does not use his own voice and only rarely uses a narrator's voice to guide the audience's response 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 the audience's responses to the central characters and the action. You might consider the effect on the audience of elements like setting, use of comparable and contrasting characters, and the characters' responses to each other. Support your argument with specific references to the play. Do not give a plot summary. (1975)

A character's attempt to recapture or 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 of reverence, bitterness, or longing. Show clear evidence from the work how the character's view of the past is used to develop the theme in the work. (1976)

In some novels or 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 play or novel and discuss the significance of such events. Do not merely summarize the plot. (1977)

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. (1978)

Choose a complex and important character in a novel or play of recognized merit who might – on the basis of the character's actions alone – be considered to be 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. Avoid plot summary. (1979)

A reoccurring theme in literature is "the classic war between 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-organized and well-written essay, show clearly the nature of the conflict, its effects upon the character, and its significance to the work. (1980)

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 sustained reference. Then write a well-organized essay in which you explain the allusion that predominates in the work and analyze how it enhances meaning. (1981)

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 contributes to the meaning of the complete work. Avoid plot summary. (1982)

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 villain's villainy and show how it enhances meaning in the work. Do not merely summarize plot. (1983)

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 play of recognized literary merit and show how the author's manipulation of time contributes to the effectiveness of the work as a whole. Do not merely summarize the plot. (1986)

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)

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. 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 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)