

AP<sup>®</sup> ENGLISH LITERATURE  
1999 SCORING GUIDELINES

Question 1

At the AP Reading, faculty consultants were given the following **General Directions**:  
The score you assign should reflect your judgment of the quality of the essay *as a whole*. **Reward the writers for what they do well.** The score for an exceptionally well-written essay may be raised by one point from the score otherwise appropriate. In no case may a poorly written essay be scored higher than 3.

9-8: These well-conceived and well-ordered essays provide insightful analysis (implicit as well as explicit) of *how* Heaney creates and conveys his memory of picking blackberries. They appreciate Heaney's physically-intense language for its vivid literal description, but they also understand the meaning of the experience on a profound, metaphoric level. Although the writers of these essays may offer a range of interpretations and/or choose different poetic elements for emphasis, these papers provide convincing readings of the poem and maintain consistent control over the elements of effective composition, including the language unique to the criticism of verse. Their textual references are apt and specific. Though they may not be error-free, they demonstrate the writers' ability to read poetry perceptively and to write with clarity and sophistication.

7-6: These essays reflect a sound grasp of Heaney's poem and the power of its language; but they prove less sensitive than the best essays to the poetic ways that Heaney invests literal experience with strong, metaphoric implications. The interpretations of the poem that they provide may falter in some particulars or they may be less thorough or precise in their discussion of *how* the speaker reveals the experience of "blackberry-picking." Nonetheless, their dependence on paraphrase, if any, will be in the service of analysis. These essays demonstrate the writers' ability to express ideas clearly, but they do not exhibit the same level of mastery, maturity, and/or control as the very best essays. These essays are likely to be briefer, less incisive, and less well-supported than the 9-8 papers.

5: These essays are, at best, superficial. They respond to the assigned task yet probably say little beyond the most easily grasped observations. Their analysis of *how* the experience of blackberry picking is conveyed may be vague, formulaic, or inadequately supported. They may suffer from the cumulative force of many minor misreadings. They tend to rely on paraphrase but nonetheless paraphrase which contains some implicit analysis. Composition skills are at a level sufficient to convey the writer's thoughts, and egregious mechanical errors do not constitute a distraction. These essays are nonetheless not as well-conceived, organized, or developed as upper-half papers.

A

In Seamus Heaney's poem "Blackberry-Picking," the use of juicy diction, clear and vivid imagery, slant rhyme and conversational rhythm, along with casual form, illustrate the poet's message that the childhood experience of picking berries holds a deeper metaphor for life; that is, childish hopes continue to exist despite the <sup>also</sup> continual slaps of reality.

The casual and childish hopefulness in the poem is clearly embodied in the conversational tone, forced by the irregular sentence structure found within the rhythm and the slant rhyme usage throughout the work. By organizing sentences in such a way that perpetuates variance of stressed and unstressed syllables, the narrative tale of berry-picking is seen in a casual light. The additional use of slant rhyme or off rhyme ("sweet/it" 5-6) also adds to the elimination of the sing-song feel that so often cause distraction of the reader in other poems. The poem's form in an AAB... rhyme scheme separated into almost rhyming couplets keeps a sense of organized structure throughout.

The use of descriptive, content-filled diction is as juicy as the blackberries in the story; this description adds

not only to the literal childish experience of berry-picking, but also to the adult acknowledgement of the significance of the experience. The clear imagery of the berries' "flesh" (5) sweetened "like thickened wine" (6) brings vivid images and striking comparisons between the berry flesh and human flesh, filled with "summer's blood" (6). The fact that the memory of the adult, reflecting back upon the childhood experience is so strong as to remember all of the "milk cans; pea tins, [and] jam pots" (9) provides an additional link through repetitive diction to the metaphor that is to come. Imagery is also solidified through such literary elements as consonance "tricked and picked" (12) alliteration "big dark blobs buried" (14), and personification as it is "hunger" (8) that sent the children out to gather all of the berries.

Through the childhood experience of gathering berries, the speaker uses literary elements to show the deeper metaphor for idealistic hope and its survival despite realistic confinements. The structure of the poem, by separating the initial tale of the berry picking into 8 couplets and the reflection upon the fermentation and rot into four couplets indicates the

speaker's belief that the childish, innocent hope for sweetness and goodness continues on. This is paradoxically established further in the speaker's description of "all the lovely canbals smelt of rot" (13) as the hopes of sweet, lovely blackberries are destroyed by the inevitable natural decay of what was sweet and good in the berries. This grim picture, of the natural decay and destruction of the things we cherish enough to go search after even "where briars scratched" (10) and when "our hands were peppered / with thorn pricks" (15-16), presents a "depressing image of the world around us. We sacrifice for the "lust for / picking" (7-8) and are yet denied the fruits of our labor. This destruction of what people materialistically search for, however, does offer hope. Although the human possessions do not keep forever, the hope that nature's goodness will continue on is ~~present~~ mirrored in the childish hope that the berries will keep despite the knowledge that the berries themselves will rot. More important than actually saving the berries then, is the value placed on nature and the triumph in the berry-pick. The fact that the berries were picked every year despite the knowledge that they would spoil is the finishing

touch on the role that hope has  
in our society.

The ideals of natural preservation,  
although tainted by inevitable decay  
of what is worked for, are perpetuated  
not by the physical salvation of nature's  
goods, but by the internal value that  
is placed on nature. In "Blackberry  
Pickin'" the adult reflection upon the  
childhood innocence of that hope  
is reflected poignantly by the lush  
descriptions and imagery of a memory  
that in some way, ~~is~~ true to us all

AP<sup>®</sup> ENGLISH LITERATURE  
1999 SCORING COMMENTARY

Question 1

Sample A

Doubtless there are other essays that convey the poem's meaning in a more compelling fashion than this essay manages — or that supply fuller readings of the rich imagery and diction found in "Blackberry-Picking." However, this is one whale of an essay! So much information is provided by this lengthy piece that it seems perverse to fault the essay because of a vexing omission or dubious assertion ("casual form," for instance?). The expertise as well as the ambition of the writer is apparent from the outset with the sophisticated technical observations about syntax, rhyme, and meter. If these comments do not hold up to scrutiny in their entirety, we forgive the lapses and credit the attempt, amazed at what the writer has accomplished! (Dissection of sound effects simply does not occur in other essays to any appreciable extent.) Similarly, we overlook the several errors in writing: the subject-verb disagreement in the first sentence, for example, or the awkward syntax that results a time or two when the student tries to combine specific examples with commentary.

The student proceeds with a stunning level of analytical command. A commitment to using details to illustrate points is obvious, and the writer has impressive facility with the vocabulary appropriate to literary criticism. Furthermore, the essay reflects an innate sensitivity to the speaker's tone by suggesting the complex tensions between enthusiasm and disappointment, joy and pain, life and death that persist throughout "Blackberry-Picking." The writer notes the separation between the two parts of the poem as a function of form and content — the second segment brings overwhelming confirmation of the appalling futility of the effort to "hoard" the berries. However, he or she understands that the language that describes the boy's eager blackberry-picking experiences in the first section incorporates the seasoned reaction of the adult: disappointment is inherent in the boyish hope the young writer describes with such conviction.

Even when the student lacks precision in an explanation, he or she does not superimpose "higher meanings" upon the literal images and actions of the poem, but renders meaning as integral to the language and various poetic elements that create and convey it. In sum, both the poet and the young critic who writes so ably about Heaney's artistry view with compassion the ongoing nature of the human struggle to stay the unstayable. The student's full embrace of the joy and exuberance conveyed in the blackberry struggle is inspiring evidence of his or her own youthful enthusiasm for life — and for poetry. The mature regard for the natural law of decline and death is similarly impressive. Imagine what he or she might do with a second — or third — draft of this essay!

Sample B

This essay is much less multi-dimensional than the very rich one provided by the first young writer, and more is suggested and implied than fully developed in its discussion. The student seems to intuit the strengths of the poem, but fails to describe its artistry with clarity or sustained