

AP Literature & Composition

SSS#1

Poetry



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The Black Walnut Tree

By Mary Oliver

Overview: In order to write an analysis that will merit an upper score on the poetry question, you must first know:

- how to read a poem
- how to recognize points for discussion
- how to select details to explain the author’s use of poetic devices
- how to link poetic devices to meaning

The most frequently asked questions used in the prompts address the literal understanding of the poem, the poet’s purpose or attitude, the techniques used to convey it, and a universal theme.

Because the poems chosen for this timed exam are rich in figurative language, you can hone your skills of analytical reading by distinguishing the literal from the figurative, examining words in context, and observing form as well as syntactical structures and punctuation.

The prompt provides:

- Background on the poem(s) and speaker.
- A task for the writer to examine via their essay.
- A list of possible devices or strategies to focus reading/annotation.

As you read poems, complete these steps:

- Read poetry as you do prose – in sentences, NOT lines.
- Separate each sentence with a backslash (/) as you read.
- Draw a line dividing the poem at each major shift. Circle the volta (the single-turning point).
- Look for connections, repetitions, and contrasts.
- Paraphrase the sentence in the margin.
- Mark poetic devices (ex. “night’s starr’d face” – personification).

The following are common challenge areas in student essays according to College Board:

- Managing complexity – Literature is complex and demands a layered analysis.
- Examining meaning as complex and nuanced.
- Organizing responses in such a way that they are **driven by insights**, not devices.
- Responding to the prompt.
- Examining the nuance of tone.
- Using the context.
- Analyzing instead of just stating what is in the poem or summarizing.
- Analyzing the structure of a poem beyond just stanzaic structures.

Reading, Planning, Writing

Reading & Planning Suggestions (about 10 minutes or less).

1. Deconstruct the prompt

- ✓ What is the prompt asking you to do?
- ✓ Find the verbs (i.e.: read, write, analyze).
- ✓ Answer all parts of the prompt!

2. Contextualize

- ✓ Is the poem's date or year provided?
- ✓ Where is the author from?
- ✓ If you are told to read two poems, are they from the same authors/time periods/etc? What is the same and what is different about them?
- ✓ Is there any other information given that could be helpful?

3. Read and annotate

- ✓ Title (What is the significance of the title before you read the poem? After?)
- ✓ Speaker (Who is speaking? What is their tone?)
- ✓ Diction (Do any connotations play on the poem's meaning? Allusions?)
- ✓ Figurative Language/Imagery (How do the images help create meaning? Simile, metaphor, personification, or other devices work in the poem?)
- ✓ Structure (Is it a ballad? A Sonnet? Where are the shifts? What kind of stanzas are used?)

4. Create a quick outline of your essay.

- ✓ Focus your paragraphs around ideas/insights, not by devices.
- ✓ It may be helpful to begin by identifying the speaker, the subject, and the situation.

5. Write your thesis – make sure it answers the prompt.

** Be sure you answer the WHAT and HOW

- ✓ WHAT (theme, idea, outcome, effect, meaning, etc.)
- ✓ HOW (poetic devices, techniques, organization, tone, selection of detail, imagery, etc.)

Writing Tips (about 30 minutes)

- ✓ Write in present tense.
- ✓ Keep your thesis central to your essay.
- ✓ Look for shifts in theme, subject matter, tone, chronology, or speaker and use them for chunking the essay.
- ✓ Look for power phrases that have an impact due to meaning or sound.
- ✓ Look for words or phrases that are used in a new or unusual way. If a poet deviates from the expected, there is probably a reason which you can/should explore.
- ✓ Focus on the things you know in the poem, not the things you don't know.
- ✓ Weave in small quotes from the poem, just the gold that supports your idea(s). Do not use full quotations, it is not a good use of time nor does it demonstrate your thinking.
- ✓ Organize your essay by the natural divisions in the poem's ideas, stanzas, or themes. Your essay should be an analysis of why the poem is effective in portraying a theme, not about the literary techniques used or your interpretation of the poem.
- ✓ Move your essay forward with every sentence that you write.

English Literature and Composition
(2013 Released Exam)
Question 1

(Suggested time – 40 minutes. This question counts as one-third of the total essay section score.)

Carefully read the following poem by Mary Oliver. Then write a well-organized essay in which you analyze how Oliver conveys the relationship between the tree and the family through the use of figurative language and other poetic devices.

“The Black Walnut Tree” by Mary Oliver

My Mother and I debate:
we could sell
the black walnut tree
to the lumberman,
5 and pay off the mortgage.
Likely some storm anyway
will churn down its dark boughs,
smashing the house. We talk
slowly, two women trying
10 in a difficult time to be wise.
Roots in the cellar drains,
I say, and she replies
that the leaves are getting heavier
every year, and the fruit
15 harder to gather away.
But something brighter than money
moves in our blood- an edge
sharp and quick as a trowel
that wants us to dig and sow.
20 So we talk, but we don't do
anything. That night I dream
of my fathers out of Bohemia
filling the blue fields
of fresh and generous Ohio
25 with leaves and vines and orchards.
What my mother and I both know
is that we'd crawl with shame
in the emptiness we'd made
in our own and our father's backyard.
30 So the black walnut tree
swings through another year
of sun and leaping winds,
of leaves and bounding fruit,
and, month after month, the whip-
35 crack of the mortgage.

2013 AP English Literature Scoring Guide
Question #1: “The Black Walnut Tree” by Mary Oliver

General Directions: This scoring guide will be useful for most essays that you read, but in problematic cases, please consult your table leader. The score that you assign should reflect your judgment of the quality of the essay as whole – its content, style, and mechanics. **Reward the writers for what they do well.** The score for an exceptionally well-written essay may be raised by one point above the otherwise appropriate score. In no case may a poorly written essay be scored higher than a three (3).

9 – 8 These essays offer a ***persuasive*** analysis of Oliver’s use of figurative language and other poetic techniques to convey her ideas about the relationship between the tree and the family. The writers of these essays offer a range of interpretations; they provide convincing readings of both the ideas and Oliver’s use of figurative language and other poetic techniques. They demonstrate consistent and effective control over the elements of composition in language appropriate to the analysis of poetry. Their textual references are apt and specific. Though they may not be error-free, these essays are perceptive in their analysis and demonstrate writing that is clear and sophisticated, and in the case of a nine (9) essay, especially persuasive.

7 – 6 These essays offer a ***reasonable*** analysis of Oliver’s use of figurative language and other poetic techniques to convey her ideas about the relationship between the tree and family. They are less thorough or less precise in their discussion of the ideas and Oliver’s use of figurative language and other poetic techniques, and their analysis of the relationship between the two is less thorough or convincing. These essays demonstrate the writer’s ability to express ideas clearly, making references to the text, although they do not exhibit the same level of effective writing as the 9-8 papers. Essays scored a seven (7) present better developed analysis and more consistent command of the elements of effective composition than do essays scored a six (6).

5 These essays respond to the assigned task with a plausible reading of Oliver’s use of figurative language and other poetic techniques to convey her ideas about the relationship between the tree and family, but tend to be superficial in their analysis of the ideas and of figurative language and other poetic techniques. They often rely on paraphrase, which may contain some analysis, implicit or explicit. Their analysis of the relationship of the ideas or of Oliver’s use of figurative language and other poetic techniques may be vague, formulaic, or minimally supported by references to the text. There may be minor misinterpretations of the poem. These writers demonstrate some control of language, but their essays may be marred by surface errors. These essays are not as well conceived, organized, or developed as 7-6 essays.

4 – 3 These lower-half essays fail to offer an adequate analysis of the poem. The analysis may be partial, unconvincing, or irrelevant, or may ignore Oliver’s ideas about the relationship between the tree and family or her use of figurative language and other poetic techniques. Evidence from the poem may be slight or misconstrued, or the essays may rely on paraphrase only. The writing often demonstrates a lack of control over the conventions of composition, inadequate development of ideas, accumulation of errors, or a focus that is unclear, inconsistent, or repetitive. Essays scored a three (3) may contain significant misreading and/or demonstrate inept writing.

2 – 1 These essays compound the weaknesses of the papers in the 4-3 range. Although some attempt has been made to respond to the prompt, the writer’s assertions are presented with little clarity, organization, or support from the poem. These essays may contain serious errors in grammar and mechanics. They may offer a complete misreading or be unacceptably brief. Essays scored a one (1) contain little coherent discussion of the poem.

0 These essays give a response that is completely off topic or inadequate; there may be some mark or a drawing or a brief reference to the task.

-- These essays are entirely blank.

