

Analyzing (not merely interpreting or explicating) a poem

Poetry is different from prose. At this point, it would not serve our purposes to try to define exactly *what* poetry is or *why* poets choose this form to express themselves. It is sufficient to know that poetry is different. Students, teachers, critics, and so on tend to read poetry in three ways. Often they confuse the methods and think they are reading one way, when they are actually reading another.

Interpretation is probably the most common type of reading and may very well be the only type you've ever performed. It is the process of figuring out what the poem means, especially on a deeper level than comprehending the surface text. In an interpretation essay, you usually provide quotations from the poem to support your claims about what it means. You may even have to discuss the meanings of individual words or the syntax of individual phrases, clauses, and sentences to support your interpretation.

Many people confuse this examination of such small parts of the poem as analysis, but it is not.

Explication is a line-by-line retelling of the poem. It is a useful activity in the processes of surface understanding and theme interpretation.

Because this process examines the poem line by line, many people believe this is analysis, but it is not.

Analysis is an examination of how the poem works—not *what it means*, but *how it means* what it means. Analysis does not ask you only to identify the tone or mood, but it asks you to figure out how the poet conveyed the tone or mood. You know that Dr. Seuss is fun to read. Analysis is the process by which you examine how Seuss's rhythm and rhyme schemes contribute to that fun. You know that limericks are humorous. Analysis is the process by which you figure out how structure, and, again, rhythm and rhyme add to the humor. Analysis does not ask you merely to identify the rhythm or rhyme scheme or point out the use of devices like onomatopoeia, alliteration, metaphor, and so on; analysis asks you to show what those conventions or devices are doing, how they are working, what their role is in the poem's overall effect.

Remember that your Advanced Placement exam will hardly ever ask you merely to interpret a piece of literature. It will almost never ask you to explicate a poem. *It will, however, ask you to perform analysis, in both the multiple-choice questions and the free-responses.*

Emily Dickinson wrote nearly eighteen hundred poems, though fewer than a dozen were published during her lifetime. Dickinson's friends and relatives astonished to discover the full extent of her work. The body of work did not adhere to the common poetic conventions of Dickinson's day, and as a result, it was widely criticized when it was finally published after her death.

The last night that she lived

EMILY DICKINSON (1830–1886)

The last night that she lived,
It was a common night,
Except the dying: this to us
Made nature different.

We noticed smallest things,—
Things overlooked before,
By this great light upon our minds
Italicized, as 'twere.

That others could exist
While she must finish quite,
A jealousy for her arose
So nearly infinite.

We waited while she passed;
It was a narrow time,
Too jostled were our souls to speak,
At length the notice came.

She mentioned, and forgot;
Then lightly as a reed
Bent to the water, shivered scarce,
Consented, and was dead.

And we, we placed the hair,
And drew the head erect;
And then an awful leisure was,
Our faith to regulate.

Sample Multiple-Choice Questions:

- Dickinson uses the word *italicized* (stanza 2) to mean
 - clarified.
 - made visible.
 - discerned.
 - emphasized*.
 - set apart.
- What effect does the repetition of *we* in the final stanza achieve?
 - distance the speaker from her grief
 - transition from the dead to the living*
 - emphasize the role of the speaker
 - draw the reader into the scene
 - deemphasize the uniqueness of the event
- What about the metrical pattern of this poem alters the rhythm of the last two lines of each stanza?
 - the uniformity of all lines
 - the end punctuation of each line
 - the shorter fourth line
 - the change of metric feet
 - the longer third line*
- A significant contrast explored by this poem is that between
 - the ordinary and profound*.
 - faith and unbelief.
 - companionship and aloneness.
 - living and dying.
 - acceptance and grief.
- The wording of the first line of the poem is an example of
 - tragic irony.
 - situational irony.
 - verbal irony*.
 - dramatic irony.
 - poetic justice.

Answers and Explanations:

- Stanza 2 begins, "We noticed smallest things—Things overlooked before." Therefore, (A) can be easily eliminated, as what is being described is a new awareness, not a new understanding. (B) is possibly more tempting, but the "things" are not things that were formerly invisible, only unnoticed. (C) might tempt some, but as with (A), the contrast is noticing what had been overlooked, not distinguishing between two or more objects. (E) is perhaps more tempting, but it raises the question of what is being set apart from what—the situation is the same "things" changing status from overlooked to noticed. (D), however, suggests that the "things" were indeed always there and always visible, but in the context of the death, these "things" are better noticed. **Thus, (D) is the best answer.**
- Throughout the poem, there are several references to the speaker of the poem and the other persons present at the death. (A) is unlikely as the use of first person certainly does not create a distance between the narrator and anything or anyone else; nor does the plural. (C) might be tempting if it were singular, but the nonspecific plural does not clarify exactly who performed what. (D) is also tempting, but this has most likely occurred at the first use of the first person in Stanza 2. (E) contradicts one of the central issues of the poem—the contrast of the unique event in the midst of ordinary life. The penultimate stanza, however, has been about the dying woman and her actions at the moment of death, and the final stanza describes the futile activities of the still living. **Thus, (B) is the best answer.**
- A quick scan of the poem reveals that each four-line stanza begins with two iambic-trimeter lines followed by a line of iambic tetrameter, then ending with iambic trimeter. Thus, (A) is immediately eliminated. (B) might tempt some students, but punctuation ultimately has nothing to do with rhythm. (C) is untrue. The third line is longer; the fourth line is the same as the others. (D) is likewise incorrect, as the meter is iambic throughout the poem. Once the ear and tongue have grown accustomed to the brevity and the sudden stops of the three-foot lines, the four-foot line seems naturally to flow directly into the final line, creating the effect of a single iambic-heptameter line. **Thus, (E) is the correct answer.**

4. (B) is mildly suggested by the final stanza, but there is nothing to suggest the disbelief. (C) is suggested by the use of first person plural, but the aloneness of the dying woman is more inferred by the reader than suggested by the poem. (D) is suggested in the first stanza, but is not really an idea explored by the poem. Likewise, (E) is vaguely suggested by the final two stanzas, but is not a significant theme. From its first mention in the first stanza, however, (A) is both mentioned and illustrated in the living's awareness of previously unnoticed things, their "jealousy" that the dying woman was "finished quite," the simplicity of the death itself, and the living's futile actions arranging the body. **Thus, (A) is the best answer.**

5. The poem is about the death of a woman and the effects this death has on the living. The first line, however, reads, "The last night that she lived," not "The night she died..." Thus, some form of irony is operating in the poet's naming the opposite of her real subject. (A) can be eliminated because the irony involved in the line does not concern anyone's misunderstanding of the situation. (B) is tempting since the line does suggest a reversal of what is happening, but it is not the case that desired or expected results are not coming to pass. (D), like (A), is eliminated by the fact that no one is misapprehending the situation. There is nothing in the poem that that dying woman "deserves" to die, thus eliminating (E). The verbal irony (C) occurs in the poet's identifying the woman's death in its opposite terms, the end of her life. **Thus, (C) is the best answer.**

Sample Free-Response Item 1 (text-based):

Carefully read Emily Dickinson's "The last night that she lived." Then write a well-organized and supported essay in which you analyze the contributions of rhythm and structure to the tone and meaning of the overall poem.

Emily Dickinson is not generally known for her creative or experimental use of poetic conventions like rhythm and rhyme. In fact, anyone who's read more than a few of Dickinson's poems quickly realizes that she tends to follow the typical 4 - 3 - 4 - 3 rhythm and A - B - C - B rhyme scheme of the traditional (and clichéd) ballad! It is difficult, then, to try to offer a definitive argument about the connection between form and meaning in Dickinson's poetry. In "The Last Night that She Lived," however, there is enough evidence of intentional rhythm and rhyme scheme to suggest that Dickinson was trying to create a particular effect. If this

Scorer Commentary

¹ None of these free-response questions will require prior knowledge of the author or piece, so this statement will not hurt this student's score, but it won't necessarily help her either. However, an understanding of Dickinson's typical patterns would certainly be helpful in drafting a thesis for this essay.

were true, it might be argued that Dickinson's sense that the woman's death was an incomprehensible disruption of routine is mirrored in her inability to settle into a consistent rhyme scheme and her own disruption of her default metric pattern.²

The death of the woman occurs on a "common night, / Except the dying." Awaiting news of the death, the speaker and those she is with begin to see everything differently. Even commonplace things seem more important, as if they were "italicized." After the death, the speaker and the others perform insignificant acts, "plac[ing] the hair, / And [drawing] the head erect." The speaker acknowledges that they face "an awful leisure." The death, then, has been an interruption of the speaker's routine and has resulted in an alteration of her frame of mind.³

This disruption of routine and altered mental state are conveyed not only in Dickinson's words but in her rhythm pattern and rhyme schemes as well. The disruption to the routine, expressed at the beginning of the poem, "The last night that she lived, / It was a common night, / Except the dying," is echoed in the way Dickinson disrupts her own rhythmic pattern. The first two lines of the poem are iambic trimeter: "The last - night that - she lived / It was - a com - mon night - " The third line, however, is iambic tetrameter: "Except - the dy - ing; this - to us - " The last line returns to iambic trimeter.⁴

This pattern is interesting for a couple of reasons. First, within this poem itself there is an established pattern—iambic tetrameter—and then a disruption to that pattern, in a line that says the dying made a common night uncommon.⁵ Every stanza follows this same pattern of iambic trimeter broken with iambic tetrameter—which, ironically, becomes a pattern itself—and in three of the five stanzas, the long-line variant speaks to the uncommonness of the experience of death: "By this great light upon our minds - A jealousy for her arose - Too jostled were our souls to speak - " So there is an interesting correspondence between the words telling us that the woman's dying changed things while the established rhythm of the poem also changes.⁶

This pattern is also interesting because it's almost the exact opposite of the rhythm Dickinson usually uses in her poems. Almost all of Dickinson's poems follow a pattern of alternating iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. This poem, about the disruption a death of a loved one can cause to one's routine and point of view, turns that rhythmic pattern upside down.⁷

Scorer Commentary

² Here's the student's thesis.

³ It is usually a good idea to establish the validity of your interpretation of the poem. Remember, though, that you do not want your essay to deteriorate into mere summary.

⁴ Good start, but we need to make sure we go deeper than merely identifying the metric pattern.

⁵ This is good. The student is connecting her identification of the rhythm with the meaning of the poem.

⁶ This student knows that she must show her reader the connection, not merely hint at it.

⁷ Again, this student's prior knowledge is not required to answer this free-response question, but this is a valid and fairly well discussed argument.

The rhyme scheme of this poem is interesting in that the poem really doesn't have one. The attempt at a rhyme scheme, however, or the scheme of close rhymes could be said to mirror the disrupting effects of the woman's death on the speaker. Of the words that should constitute the poem's rhyme scheme: "lived - night - us - different - - things - before - minds - 'twere - exist - quite - arose - infinite - - passed - time - speak - came - forgot - reed - scarce - dead - hair - erect - was - regulate - - there are only three pairs that even come close to rhyming. For a poem with such a notable and consistent rhythm pattern, the absence of a rhyme scheme is unexpected. As the vast majority of Dickinson's poems follow an AB-AB rhyme scheme, this absence of rhyme is even more surprising.⁸

It could be, however, that Dickinson's departure from her own norm reflects the way the woman's death caused a departure from the norm of the speaker in the poem. The night was a common night except for the dying, and that made nature seem different to them. This strangeness caused by the death is expressed not only in the poem's words but mirrored in the poems, rhythmic pattern and rhyme scheme as well.⁹

Scorer Commentary

⁸ This is not the student's strongest point, but she does make a strong effort not to ignore the instruction in the question to discuss rhythm and rhyme.

⁹ The essay ends rather abruptly, but it does return to its thesis, and it has discussed the full issue of the question. It has also provided textual support to back up nearly all of its claims.

Sample Free-Response Item 2 (Independent):

A common definition of poetry is "the measured language of emotion." Indeed, poetry is often considered to be the best medium for the exploration of profound and inexplicable truths. Choose a poem that exemplifies the "measured language of emotion" and write a thoughtful, well-organized essay in which you analyze the ways in which the poet "measures" language in order to communicate or recreate profound emotion. Do not merely explain the emotion communicated or offer a simple line-by-line explication of the poem.

All of Emily Dickinson's poems might be said to illustrate the idea of "the measured language of emotion," but none so well as her poem that begins with the line, "The last night that she lived." This poem uses very careful word choice as well as an unexpected rhythm and almost nonexistent rhyme scheme to illustrate the incomprehensible nature of the death of a loved one.² Some thoughts or feelings are too deep and complex to be expressed in language, and this poem is a perfect example of this principle.

The first way Dickinson "measures" language is through her very careful word choice.³ The poem begins with the line, "The last night that she lived..." instead of "the night she died." Both mean the same thing, but by describing the night as the "last night that she lived," Dickinson is expressing her emotions in words she and the reader can understand. We know what it is to live, but we don't know what it is to die. As difficult as it might be for the reader to understand the idea that this is the "last night that she lived," this wording is still more comprehensible to us than "the night she died." We don't know, really, what that means.⁴

The rest of the poem continues to describe the experience of the woman's death from the viewpoint of the people still living. The words reflect Dickinson's difficulty finding profound words to describe a profound event. The night was "common" except for the death, and that made "nature different." The idea that someone's death would make an ordinary night "different" from other nights is an understatement. The fact that the death made them reexamine things they once took for granted can only be described by Dickinson saying it was as if the common things were now "italicized." The nervousness or grief or guilt the people feel waiting to receive the news that the woman has died, Dickinson describes as their souls being "jostled." Again, the commonness of the word in terms of the

Scorer Commentary

¹ Simply restating the question and making it a little more specific works well for this student to begin her essay.

² This second sentence effectively makes the focus of this essay even sharper.

³ The organizational pattern this student has apparently chosen is fairly obvious, but it should still give her a nicely organized essay.

⁴ Keeping in mind that this is the independent free-response essay, close direct quotations are not expected, but the student should be able to at least cite and quote the first line that doubles as the title of this poem.

⁵ This student is making excellent use of individual words and phrases she is able to remember from the poem. This illustrates that it is an excellent idea to keep a running log of key words and phrases from the literature you study.

profoundness of the emotion is an understatement. On the one hand, it might seem as if the speaker was young and uneducated with a limited vocabulary, but it is just as likely that Dickinson is simply trying to express the inexpressible in terms both she and her reader can understand—"measuring language" to express emotion.⁶

Dickinson's rhythm and rhyme scheme—especially her lack of a rhyme scheme—can also be considered examples of her "measuring language" in order to express emotion. The rhythm is not unique or experimental, but it does play with the typical rhythm of a ballad stanza, or hymn stanza, which was the staple of Dickinson's poetry. Instead of the 4 - 3 - 4 - 3 alternating iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter of the typical ballad or nineteenth-century hymn,⁷ Dickinson surprises the reader with a 3 - 3 - 4 - 3 stanza (iambic trimeter interrupted by a line of iambic tetrameter). The shorter lines invite the reader to pause and reflect on the idea expressed in the line ("The last night that she lived" ... "At length the notice came"), while the longer lines seem to reflect an overflow of feeling, an inability to contain the emotions ("Too jostled were our souls to speak").⁸

Similarly, Dickinson uses an unexpected rhyme scheme—actually, no real rhyme scheme at all—to illustrate this "measured language of emotion." Typically, one expects a four-line stanza, especially one based on a ballad or hymn structure, to have an A - B - C - B or A - B - A - B rhyme scheme. This poem has neither. In fact, for the most part, there is no rhyme with the possible exception of a few close rhymes that appear at random and do not seem to be intentional on Dickinson's part. Since Dickinson does know how to rhyme, it is entirely possible that she intended this lack of rhyme with only a few, random near-rhymes to suggest a break in the pattern, the interruption of the ordinary. Just as the woman's death caused a break in the people's understanding of normalcy, so, too, does the actual structure of the poem show a break.⁹

Emily Dickinson's "The Last Night that she Lived," then, is a perfect example of the definition of poetry as "the measured language of emotion." From word choice, to rhythm, to rhyme scheme, Dickinson plans and measures her use of language to create the break in thought and the disruption of normality that are the result of the death of a loved one.¹⁰

Scorer Commentary

⁶ The argument is not bad. It is fairly well supported with brief quotations and direct references to the text, and the student brings this part of her discussion nicely back to the thesis.

⁷ Because the student—in the independent free-response essay—has chosen to write about this poet and this poem, a little prior knowledge like this is expected. It is the intention of questions like this to test the student's knowledge of literary elements like typical forms and structures.

⁸ It is apparent the student has studied this poem very closely in class. For the independent free-response question, you will also want to make sure you pick a piece of literature you know extremely well.

⁹ The student has demonstrated a knowledge of the poem and of Emily Dickinson's work in general. She has also shown that she has some knowledge of poem forms and structures, so her not quoting the rhyming words does not hurt her here.

¹⁰ This last paragraph is a very nice return to the thesis and the points brought up in the introduction.

Exercise Two:

Questions 6 – 10. The poem form **rondeau** originated in France as a fifteen-line poem written on two rhymes. The English **rondeau** is typically fifteen lines and makes use of refrains, repeated according to a prescribed pattern—thirteen lines of eight syllables, plus two refrains, each with four syllables. The English **rondeau** is written on three rhymes. The typical fifteen lines are divided into three irregular stanzas. The rhyme scheme of the poem can be plotted: A B B A; A B C (refrain); and A B A C (refrain). The refrain is identical to the beginning of the first line of the poem.

The **rondeau redoublé** is a related form consisting of six four-line stanzas. It has the overall rhyme scheme: A B A B; B A B A; B A B A; B A B A; A B A B; A B A B C. The last line of stanzas two through five repeats one of the four lines from stanza one, and the final line of the poem repeats the beginning of the first line.

Paul Laurence Dunbar's "Beyond the Years," while neither a **rondeau** nor **rondeau redoublé**, follows an intricate pattern reminiscent of these established forms. Study the poem closely and then choose the best answers to the multiple-choice questions.

Beyond the Years

PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR (1872-1906)

I

Beyond the years the answer lies,
Beyond where brood the grieving skies
And Night drops tears.
Where Faith tod-chastened smiles to rise
And doff its fears,
And carping Sorrow pines and dies—
Beyond the years.

II

Beyond the years the prayer for rest
Shall beat no more within the breast;
The darkness clears,
And Morn perched on the mountain's crest
Her form uprears—
The day that is to come is best,
Beyond the years.

III

Beyond the years the soul shall find
 That endless peace for which it pined,
 For light appears,
 And to the eyes that still were blind
 With blood and tears,
 Their sight shall come all unconfined
 Beyond the years.

"Beyond the Years" from *The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar: Lyrics of Lowly Life* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1922)

Multiple-Choice Questions 6–10:

6. All of the following are true of "Beyond the Years" EXCEPT

- A. iambic tetrameter.
- B. an ending couplet.
- C. regular stanzas.
- D. a single refrain.
- E. intricate rhyme.

7. The overall effect of the short half-lines is to

- A. increase the pace of the poem.
- B. divert the reader's attention.
- C. contrast opposing emotions.
- D. interrupt the rhythmic flow.
- E. allow the reader to reflect.

8. Laurence Dunbar achieves a shift in tone in the second stanza by

- A. beginning and ending the stanza with the refrain.
- B. reversing the rhythmic pattern.
- C. personifying abstract concepts.
- D. juxtaposing contrasting images.
- E. altering the rhyme scheme.

9. Which of the following is most true of the refrain, "Beyond the years"?

- A. Its meaning evolves with each repetition.
- B. It provides unity to the poem.
- C. It establishes a tone of expectation or longing.
- D. It emphasizes the poem's theological theme.
- E. Its tone reflects the overall tone of the poem.

10. By ending this poem as he does, Dunbar achieves

- A. emphasis.
- B. irony.
- C. clarity.
- D. catharsis.
- E. repudiation.

Free-Response Item 1 (text-based):

Carefully read Paul Laurence Dunbar's "Beyond the Years." Then write an organized, well-supported essay in which you analyze the techniques Dunbar uses to convey to the reader both an intellectual understanding and emotional appreciation of the subject of the poem. Do not merely summarize the plot or provide a line-by-line explication.

Before you write your essay:

1. Make sure you understand exactly what you're being asked to write about.
 - List all of the verbs in the prompt.
 - Underline the verb that describes the essay.
 - Write the direct object of that verb.
2. Make sure you have something valid to write about.
 - Write a sentence or two that make a positive and focused statement about the topic.
 - Make sure these sentences address all of the issues and subpoints specified in the prompt.
3. Review the selection and find your textual support.
4. Write your essay.
 - Keep referring to the prompt and whatever you underlined or highlighted in the selection to make sure you're on track and addressing everything the prompt wants you to address.

Free-Response Item 2 (Independent):

While modern and post-modern writers often condemn the structured and formal, many poets still write powerfully and meaningfully within the confines of formal rhythm and intricate rhyme. Choose a twentieth- or twenty-first-century poem that follows formal conventions of rhythm and rhyme and write a thoughtful and well-reasoned essay in which you analyze the contribution these conventions make to other literary elements like tone and meaning. Do not merely identify the conventions or demonstrate how they are applied in the poem.

Before you write your essay:

1. Make sure you understand exactly what you're being asked to write about.
 - List all of the verbs in the prompt.
 - Underline the verb that describes the essay.
 - Write the direct object of that verb.
2. Choose an appropriate selection.

If you're using this book, your teacher probably wants you to write your essay on whatever story, article, poem, etc., the writing prompt follows.
3. Make sure you have something to say about both the topic and your selected literature.
 - Think in terms of narrative structure: organization of ideas, etc.
 - Make sure you jot down notes that pertain to the assigned topic.
 - Jot down quotations or at least close paraphrases.
 - Jot down everything you know and remember about the assigned topic.
4. Make sure you are clear about what you are going to say.

Write a sentence or two that make a positive and focused statement about the topic.

Make sure these sentences address all of the issues and subpoints specified in the prompt.
5. Write your essay.



Prestwick House Pre-AP: Readings and Exercises

Assessing "Literary Merit"

MINI-CHAPTER 5.5:

HERE IS A SCENE IN THE 1989 MOVIE *Dead Poet's Society* in which the students are reading page 23 of the introduction to their literature text *Understanding Poetry*, by Dr. J. Evans Pritchard, Ph.D. The text describes two criteria—after one is “fluent with [the work’s] meter, rhyme, and figures of speech”—by which a work’s literary merit may be assessed: the work’s *perfection* (How artfully has the objective of the poem been rendered?) and its *importance* (How important is that objective?). According to the fictional Dr. Pritchard, one can construct a graph with a work’s perfection indicated on the horizontal and its importance on the vertical. The work’s overall “greatness” is the area created by plotting the horizontal and the vertical.

The boys’ teacher, played by Robin Williams, has them tear these pages out of their texts and throw them away.

Sadly, the determination of a work’s “greatness” (a synonym for “literary merit”) is not as easy as a mathematical formula. What do we mean by artful? Are Ernest Hemingway’s short, simple sentences more or less “artful” than Henry James’s long, complicated ones? Is Hawthorne’s use of adjectives and adverbs more “artful” than Poe’s?

Similarly, what do we mean by “important”? Is James’s exploration of an artist’s perception in “The Real Thing” important? How about the girls’ disillusionment in “The Standard of Living”? Yet both of these stories are still in print, anthologized, and might possibly appear on a test like an AP exam several decades after the authors’ deaths.

Shakespeare’s been dead for centuries. Chaucer died nearly a millennium ago (give or take a couple hundred years). But other writers whose works have appeared on recent AP exams are still alive and writing. So it cannot be simply a matter of age and whether the author is alive or dead.

While the issue might not be as simple as plotting two coordinates on a graph, there are some criteria by which we can assess whether something might be appropriate to write about on an AP exam when you are told to “choose a title of comparable literary merit.”

Plot driven vs. Character driven: A nineteenth-century French writer by the name of Georges Polti hypothesized that, in all the world’s literature, there are only thirty-six basic plots. Everything else is details. Therefore, many critics argue

that a work's "literary merit" does not stem from the plot but from the characters who operate within the plot.

When reduced to a basic plot level, even the most unquestionably literary works sound trivial, maybe even silly.

- An old fisherman catches a big fish, but it gets eaten by sharks before he can bring it home.
- A man whose wife has committed adultery wreaks vengeance on his wife's lover, the father of her illegitimate child.
- Two teenagers meet, fall in love, impulsively marry and then commit suicide when they think they won't be allowed to be together.
- A young lawyer rescues his fiancée from the clutches of a centuries-old vampire.

Literary merit, these critics argue, lies in the *characters*.

- Santiago is a fiercely independent man, once the best fisherman in his village, beloved by his townspeople, especially by young Manolin, who loves him like a grandfather.
- Roger Chillingworth does not love his wife, but he resents that his "marital rights" have been violated, and his one wish is to destroy the man who does not have the strength of character to reveal his identity. Hester is strong-willed and independent. While recognizing the unlawful nature of her adulterous affair, she does not believe that she has sinned since she never loved her husband, and she did love the father of her child. [*Spoiler alert!*] Arthur Dimmesdale is plagued with guilt over his violation of human law, but his knowledge of his own sin gives him an ironic charisma as the town's minister. The one man he grows to trust as a friend is the man whose chief goal is to destroy him.
- Romeo is fickle and impulsive, fawning and swooning for every beautiful girl he meets. Juliet is strong-willed and independent, but unable to stand up to her father, who is about to force her into marrying against her will.
- Jonathan Harker is a young idealist, and his fiancée Mina, while devoted to him, is unable to resist the overwhelming charisma and supernatural power of Count Dracula.

No matter how trivial or clichéd the plot may be—after all, there are only thirty-six—if the reader can care about the characters, then the work has one element of "literary merit."

Still, there are many books, plays, films, television shows, and so on, whose characters we love or hate, empathize with, or understand, but we would not choose to write about them on our AP exam.

Broad appeal: This is not the same thing as "popular," though you might be surprised how many works that are now considered "literary classics" were wildly

popular when they were originally published. Broad appeal in this instance, however, means that something in the work touches people across age, gender, nationality. Different people may not "like" the same thing in the same work, but there is something about "good" literature that appeals to a broad base of readers.

This is one reason that you see so few "genre" books on AP-style reading lists. If the book is clearly "young adult" or "chick lit" or "sci-fi/fantasy" and does not have that quality that makes it appeal also to readers who are *not* fans of that particular category, it is probably not destined for "literary greatness."

This does not mean, however, that no genre books can qualify. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* is often considered a science fiction novel. Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* is unquestionably science fiction. The "breadth" of these titles' appeal comes in their exploration of "big ideas" like *Do humans need "more" than just creature comforts in order to be happy? Is Western culture becoming "rich in things" but "poor in soul?"* and so on.

Whatever the source of that *broad appeal*, however—well-drawn and fascinating characters, exploration of big ideas—the fact that a wide variety of readers finds something of value in a book, story, or play suggests that it has "literary merit."

Lasting appeal: There is a reason so many of the works on the AP exam and on AP-style reading lists are "old." Something may be "all the rage" this week and even appeal to readers of every age, race, and nationality imaginable, but within a few years, it's out of print, and no one remembers having read it. Or it might have been your "favorite book of all time," and when you read it again a few years later, you wonder what you saw in it in the first place.

Works that continue to be read, that are constantly reprinted, that keep appearing in collections or anthologies have this lasting appeal that other works lack. Works that you can read over and over again, sometimes over periods of years, and still love also have a quality we can call "lasting appeal."

Sometimes, of course, worthwhile books, authors, etc., are forgotten and then rediscovered later. The fact that readers find something of value in a book years after was originally published (or in a play produced decades or centuries after being written) suggests that it has lasting appeal and probably some "literary merit."

Artistry: Finally, even though it's an indefinable, abstract term, at some point we do have to talk about the artistry of a work with literary merit. After all, there's a very good chance that what you're going to be asked to write about will fall into the category of "artistry"—literary or rhetorical devices, diction, organization, structure, and so on. This does not mean that "literary" works must be oppressively ornamented with dozens of dazzling but distracting devices, or that the structures of the sentences must be such as can be understood only by persons to whom advanced degrees in linguistics or morphology have been awarded; it means only that the author is in control. Like any good craftsman, the writer understands his or her tools and knows how to use them.

We don't count metaphors to assess a work's artistry, but we might evaluate the appropriateness of the metaphor. Does it fit the context of the story, or does it stand out? Does the metaphor seem so natural that you weren't even aware it was a metaphor, or is it so obvious that you can *feel* it arrive? Is it original or clichéd? Let's look at two passages and see whether we can judge the "artistry" of either one.

Then after long search into the minister's dim interior, and turning over many precious materials, in the shape of high aspirations for the welfare of his race, warm love of souls, pure sentiments, natural piety, strengthened by thought and study, and illuminated by revelation—all of which invaluable gold was perhaps no better than rubbish to the seeker—he would turn back, discouraged, and begin his quest towards another point. He groped along as stealthily, with as cautious a tread, and as wary an outlook, as a thief entering a chamber where a man lies only half asleep—or, it may be, broad awake—with purpose to steal the very treasure which this man guards as the apple of his eye. In spite of his premeditated carefulness, the floor would now and then creak; his garments would rustle; the shadow of his presence, in a forbidden proximity, would be thrown across his victim. In other words, Mr. Dimmesdale, whose sensibility of nerve often produced the effect of spiritual intuition, would become vaguely aware that Roger Chillingworth, too, had perceptions that were almost intuitive; and when the minister threw his startled eyes towards him, there the physician sat; his kind, watchful, sympathizing, but never intrusive friend.

In this example, we're using metaphor as our measure of "artistry," but it could be any tool at the writer's disposal: diction, figurative language, sentence structure, and so on. In fact, your evaluation of a piece's "artistry" will probably involve your examination of all of these in some combination. Still, since we're looking at metaphors, let's notice how subtly Hawthorne takes us from a conversation—Chillingworth is asking questions and listening to Dimmesdale speak in order to (literally) "search into the minister's dim interior." At some point, however, this psychological examination becomes a physical journey, one from which Chillingworth can "turn back." The journey quickly becomes something dark and treacherous, so that Chillingworth must "grope . . . stealthily." As Chillingworth "creeps" in Dimmesdale's soul, "the floor would now and then creak; his garments would rustle; the shadow of his presence, in a forbidden proximity, would be thrown across his victim."

This is not Chillingworth's physically creeping into Dimmesdale's bedroom; it is all a metaphoric stealth into Dimmesdale's mind, heart, and conscience. But Hawthorne's control is so complete, and the entry into the metaphor is so subtle that the reader follows along, somehow resolving the double meaning of a literal villain trying to probe another man's deepest secret and a figurative thief creeping into a dark bedroom.

That subtlety, that control, that sense that the metaphor *needs to be there* or the paragraph would be less good . . . that is artistry.

Now look at the following, an excerpt from an unpublished short story

Her mind filled with smoke before her lungs did. Her panic drove her blindly to smash out the window, even though you could see the flames through the glass. Now the room was getting hotter—a pizza kitchen in August, the brick oven itself—and every breath was a hot knife stabbing her heart.

"Help!" she tried to scream, but there was not enough air. Her lungs struggled like birthday balloons after the party is over.

Exhausted and only semi-conscious, she collapsed to the floor, where the air was still breathable, and she started to revive. The sound of a cannon shot, or a clap of thunder, and she heard voices.

Angels' voices. No, men's voices.

Kevlar arms scooped her up, and she gazed gratefully into her own face reflected in the visor of her savior's helmet.

She was being rescued.

Hopefully you can see the difference between this passage and the one from *The Scarlet Letter*. There is no apparent connection between the intensifying heat in the room and a pizza kitchen or oven. The difference in tone between a woman's suffocating in a smoke-filled room and the partially deflated balloons after a birthday party is almost laughable. The noise—is it an explosion? the sound of the door being kicked in?—besides being described in clichés (cannon cracks and thunder claps) is also unclear.

If we were to count the kinds of devices that one would expect to go into "artistry," we might actually find that the second passage has more. But clearly, the author is not in control. The devices are there for the sake of being there, not for the sake of clarity or impact.

This is not artistry.

Ultimately, the assessment of one piece as "artistic" and another as "trite" or "overwritten" is largely a matter of taste, but beyond that wide range lie uses that no serious readers would consider artistic. By and large, works in those extremes would not be considered to have "literary merit."

"Literary merit" is, then, largely a matter of personal taste and largely not. It cannot be calculated by a mathematical formula or plotted on a graph. It cannot really be defined except to suggest in broad terms that it involves a text's being largely character driven, having broad and lasting appeal, and a sense of artistry or control.

A good exercise would be to make two lists: works that do possess literary merit and works that do not. Then, for each work on each list, write a paragraph or two (or at least list) the reasons. And make sure the reasons amount to more than just *I liked it or I thought it was boring.*