

## Q1: Prompt and Poem

Read the following poem carefully, paying particular attention to the physical intensity of the language. Then write a well-organized essay in which you explain how the poet conveys not just a literal description of picking blackberries but a deeper understanding of the whole experience. You may wish to include analysis of such elements as diction, imagery, metaphor, rhyme, rhythm, and form.

### **Blackberry-Picking** **By Seamus Heaney**

*for Philip Hobsbaum*

Late August, given heavy rain and sun  
For a full week, the blackberries would ripen.  
At first, just one, a glossy purple clot  
Among others, red, green, hard as a knot.  
You ate that first one and its flesh was sweet  
Like thickened wine: summer's blood was in it  
Leaving stains upon the tongue and lust for  
Picking. Then red ones inked up and that hunger  
Sent us out with milk cans, pea tins, jam-pots  
Where briars scratched and wet grass bleached our boots.  
Round hayfields, cornfields and potato-drills  
We trekked and picked until the cans were full,  
Until the tinkling bottom had been covered  
With green ones, and on top big dark blobs burned  
Like a plate of eyes. Our hands were peppered  
With thorn pricks, our palms sticky as Bluebeard's.

We hoarded the fresh berries in the byre.  
But when the bath was filled we found a fur,  
A rat-grey fungus, glutting on our cache.  
The juice was stinking too. Once off the bush  
The fruit fermented, the sweet flesh would turn sour.  
I always felt like crying. It wasn't fair  
That all the lovely canfuls smelt of rot.  
Each year I hoped they'd keep, knew they would not.

## Q1: Sample 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 continual slap of reality.

The causal 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 is an AABB rhyme scheme, separated into rhyming couplets, keeps a sense of organized structure throughout.

The use of descriptive, consonant-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 berrys’ “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] jampots” (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, “trekked and pick~~e~~d” (12), alliteration, “big dark blobs burned” (14), and personification as it is “hunger” (8) that sent the children out to gather all 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 eight couplets and the reflection upon the formation and not 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 canfuls smelt of rot” (23) 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 deemed 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 mirrored in the childish hope that the berries will keep despite the knowledge that the berries themselves will not. 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 Picking,” 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, rings true to us all.

## Sample A Paraphrased Grader Observations

- The writer sometimes displays subject/verb problems when using more complicated grammatical structures.
- Though not all of the analysis is of equal quality, the good bits far outweigh the bad, and the thorough development in the later part of the essay makes the less good bits seem less important when compared to the achievement of the whole.
- The first body paragraph is the weakest in the essay. [My observation: *The score would have been much, much lower if the entire essay had looked like Body Paragraph 1, much closer to Sample B.*]
- The essay is ambitious, writing about things that are hard to write about: syntax, meter, and poetical form. [My observation: *Ambition is a big deal for the graders. While I obviously haven’t taught the*

*kind of technical poetry unit that would allow for even the attempt of what the writer is attempting here, trying to write about harder things pays off if you can do it well-- even if the attempt is not quite perfectly realized in the first draft execution.]*

- Sometimes the grammar is awkward when transitioning between evidence and analysis.
- The writer uses literary terms correctly and has a solid grasp of the language of literary criticism.
- The writer is sensitive to the speaker's tone. [My observation: *Tone is a huge, huge deal-- even if you are not explicitly doing a tone analysis.*]
- The writer understands how the two parts of the poem are related to overall meaning.
- Sometimes the analysis is slightly generalized.
- The most impressive thing about the essay is how the writer engages thematic material in all its complexity. [My comments: *I've tried to teach you to use this extended discussion of theme in the conclusion. This writer divides it between the last body paragraph and the conclusion, which works-- but it also dilutes the impact a little.*]
- [My observation: *This is an upper-tier essay (7-9). What got it there is primarily the level of its insight. It is not trying to take short cuts or simplifying the task, and it has a mature grasp of the source material. Some imprecisions remain, however-- showing that an essay does not have to be perfect to earn a superior score.*]

## Q1: Sample B

In Heaney's poem "Blackberry-Picking" a deeper understanding of life's ceaseless cycles is conveyed as the poem shifts from lustful and unsatisfied to disappointed and destitute. The poem was divided into two sections. The first one physically described the fall's harvest of blackberries while it symbolically described life. The vigor and youthful air given to the poem was inherent through the poet's diction. The blackberries were vividly described using strong visual and tactile images such as "glossy purple clot" (3), "red, green, hard as a knot" (4), and "big dark blobs burned" (14). The repetition of b's in line 14 further emphasizes the importance of the chosen words. It strengthens the language. Phrases such as "its flesh was sweet / Like thickened wine: summer's blood was in it" (5-6) make reference to a physical body, the words "flesh and blood" in particular. The simile "like thickened wine," draws images of drunkenness, almost an irresistible force creating a "lust for / Picking" (7-8). The tone of the poem remains unsatisfied.

The second section of the poem physically describes the decay of the blackberries, yet symbolically stands as an elaboration of death. The eighteenth line insinuates a surplus, "When the bath was filled." Strong visual descriptions of the decay were used such as "rat-grey fungus" (19) and olfactory images with "stinking" (20) and "lovely canfuls smelt of rot" (23). The poet "always felt like crying" (22) and "hoped they'd keep, knew they would not" (24). He was trying to defy life's natural cycles while knowing he was powerless against them. The poem's second half was disappointing, destitute, and full of false hope. The overall contrast between the life and death of the blackberries, with the poet's powerlessness over natural cycles, are what combine to convey a deeper understanding of the whole experience. A powerful rhyming comparison was drawn through the lively "clot" (3) and "knot" (4) at the end of those lines, and the words "rot" (23) and "not" (24) at the end of the last two lines. "Rot" and "knot" are strong negative influences, whereas "clot" and "not" are positive influences. A sharp contrast is drawn, further emphasizing the overall understanding portrayed in the poem.

## Sample B Paraphrased Grader Observations

- The two paragraph structure is ineffective.

- The analysis rambles and lacks clarity. More is implied than actually developed. [My observation: *An actual structure would have helped to keep the writer focused on developing one point at a time instead of superficially developing many, semi-related points.*]
- The writer simplifies the task from discussing complexity to showing a simple contrast. This also simplifies the point of view of the poem. [My observation: *When discussing complexity, you want to demonstrate that the experience was many things simultaneously. The writer is focused on details from the poem, not the details as they reveal the speaker's point-of-view. The point shouldn't be that words and images contrast; rather it should be that the contrasting words and images imply internal conflict and ambivalence on the part of the speaker.*]
- The writer does understand the degree of loss implied in the poem.
- Some of the diction and imagery discussions are on-point, though they lack full development.
- The discussion of the contrasts in rhyming words is clever and support the implied point that the writer seems to be trying to make (that the poem is about the contrast between life and death).
- [My observation: *This is a mid-tier essay (5-6) that has some good ideas, but fails to develop them as well as the thinking promises. In this case, there are structural and organizational problems, but the big sins are superficial development and a failure to tie back the ideas to some bigger whole. Also, like a lot of mid-tier essays, it substitutes a subtly different task for the actual one because it's easier to write.*]

## Q2: Prompt and Selection

In the following passage from Cormac McCarthy's novel, *The Crossing* (1994), the narrator describes a dramatic experience. Read the passage carefully. Then, in a well-organized essay, show how McCarthy's techniques convey the impact of the experience on the main character.

By the time he reached the first talus<sup>1</sup> slides under the tall escarpments<sup>2</sup> of the Pilates the dawn was not far to come. He reined the horse in a grassy swale and stood down and dropped the reins. His trousers were stiff with blood. He cradled the wolf in his arms and lowered her to the ground and unfolded the sheet. She was stiff and cold and her fur was bristly with the blood dried upon it. He walked the horse back to the creek and left it standing to water and scouted the banks for wood with which to make a fire. Coyotes were yapping along the hills to the south and they were calling from the dark shapes of the rimlands above him where their cries seemed to have no origin other than the night itself.

He got the fire going and lifted the wolf from the sheet and took the sheet to the creek and crouched in the dark and washed the blood out of it and brought it back and he cut forked sticks from a mountain hackberry and drove them into the ground with a rock and hung the sheet on a trestlepole where it steams in the firelight like a burning scrim standing in a wilderness where celebrants of some sacred passion had been carried off by rival sects or perhaps had simply fled in the night at the fear of their own doing. He pulled the blanket about his shoulders and sat shivering in the cold and waiting for the dawn that he could find the place where he would bury the wolf. After a while the horse came up from the creek trailing the wet reins through the leaves and stood at the edge of the fire.

He fell asleep with his hands palm up before him like some dozing penitent. When he woke it was still dark. The fire had died to a few low flames seething over the coals. He took off his hat

---

<sup>1</sup> A sloping mass of rock debris at the base of a cliff

<sup>2</sup> Steep slopes

and fanned the fire with it and coaxed it back and fed the wood he'd gathered. He looked for the horse but could not see it. The coyotes were still calling all along the stone ramparts of the Pilates and it was graying faintly in the east. He squatted over the world and touched her fur. He touched the cold and perfect teeth. The eye turned to the fire and gave back no light and he closed it with his thumb and sat by her and put his hand upon her bloodied forehead and closed his own eyes that he could her running in the mountains, running in the starlight where the grass was wet and the sun's coming as yet had not undone the rich matrix of creatures passed in the night before her. Deer and hare and dove and groundvole all richly empaneled on the air for her delight, all nations of the possible world ordained by God of which she was one among and not separate from. Where she ran the cries of the coyotes clapped shut as if a door had closed upon them out of the leaves and held it or he reached to hold what cannot be held, what already ran among the mountains at once terrible and of a great beauty, like flowers that feed on flesh. What blood and bone are made of but can themselves not make on any altar nor by any wound of war. What we may well believe has power to cut and shape and hollow out the dark forms of the world surely if wind can, if rain can. But which cannot be held never be held and is no flower but is swift and a huntress and the wind itself is in terror of it and the world cannot lose it.

## Q2: Sample C

The passage from *The Crossing* conveys a sense of awe and mystery, and in doing so, imparts the depths of the man's emotions towards the wolf. The mourning for the wolf is raised to an elegiac level, as the man reflects upon the wolf, "at once terrible and of great beauty." Several devices are employed to effectively enhance the tone of reverence and loss, including figurative language, diction, sentence structure, rhythm, and repetition.

The pace of the passage fluctuates, alternating from short, detached sentences, such as, "He squatted over the wolf and touched her fur. He touched the cold and perfect teeth," to unusually long sentences which are connected by conjunctions (mostly "and") and which serve to reflect the outpouring of emotions and the blurred response the man is experiencing, as in lines 41-47 ("The eye ... before her"). This dichotomy in sentence structure emphasizes the periods where the man is overcome by remembrances and extrapolations.

The figurative language interspersed within the passage is also highly effective, causing an air of mystery, wonder, and respect. This mood is set when the cries of the coyotes are described, "seeming to have no origin other than the night itself." The analogy of the sheet steaming (lines 21-24) enhances the aura of power and sacredness by diction such as "celebrants of some sacred passion" and "burning scrim." This sense of religious power is again made by his comparison to a "dozing penitent." A sense of the awing mixture of terror and beauty is evidenced when the narrator compares the wolf's soul to "flowers that feed on flesh," introducing an element of how "all was fear and marvel" regarding the wolf.

The repetition of certain phrases and words emphasized the ideas behind them. For example, "What we may well believe has power to cut and shape and hollow out of the dark form of the world surely if wind can, if rain can." The repetition contained within this sentence really clarifies the point that our beliefs shape our perception. Also, the repetition of "and" throughout the passage, as in lines 15-21, brings a rhythm to the passage while providing a sense of the man not really realizing what he is doing, only going through the motions.

The unspecific pronoun "He" actually provides a contrast where the grief of the man becomes more poignant. The passage metamorphizes from a more detached account about man's treatment of the body to a touching scene where the man reflects upon the wolf and her spirit.

The final thoughts, and especially the last line, is made more important by the reflections of the man. The last line is particularly emphasized by the complete lack of punctuation, which conveys the magnitude of the man's loss. His utter grief over losing the wolf is fully revealed to the reader in it, especially the last four words in stating, "But which cannot be held never be held and is no flower but is swift and a huntress and the mind itself is interior of it and the world cannot lose it."

The importance of the wolf's role in "the possible world ordained by God of which she was one among and not separate from" is made known to the reader by the man's thoughts and actions. In doing so, and in the setting (with the sun beginning to "faintly gray" the east), a mood of respectful reverence and wonderful power is created. The man is shown to be deeply impacted by the experience.

### Sample C Paraphrased Grader Observations

- The writer is doing nothing tricky. The strength of the essay lies not in its unusual approach, but in the level of its thematic insight.
- The analysis is based on precise observation of detail in the text. [*My observation: Dissenting note-- I think this happens much more in the first half of the essay. After that, it gets thinner.*]
- There is no fat in the essay. All reference to the novel serve to further the analysis.
- The writer grasps the spiritual dimension of the selection.
- [*My observation: This is an upper-tier essay (7-9), though nothing particularly flashy is happening. Sometimes just getting it-- really getting it-- is enough to lift you into the top three scores.*]

### Q2: Sample D

The techniques employed by McCarthy here create an increasingly panicked and thoughtful recollection of the main character's remorse. The first lines give no indication of any problem until it bluntly says, "His trousers were stiff with blood." This introduces, in a startling way, the main character's dilemma. There are only hints of guilt thus far, however. This is hinted at by the explicit attention to the state of the wolf, for instance, "She was stiff and cold and her fur was bristly..." Also, later there are coyotes howling in a haunting way because "their cries seemed to have no origin other than the night itself."

The second paragraph gets more definite about half-way through it. The sheet was washed of the wolf's blood and then set by the fire on a trestle pole. This is still unconvincing until the work talks about how this scene resembled "a burning scrim standing in a wilderness... some sacred passion... fled in the night at the fear of their own doing." This account seems severely tinted by an attitude of guilt and self-recrimination equal to that of Poe's beating heart and that of *Crime and Punishment*. However, this is over a wolf, not a human being.

The third paragraph leaves absolutely no room for doubt. It starts with, "He fell asleep... like some dozing penitent." When he awoke he set by her "and closed his own eyes that he could see her running in the mountains..." Next, there was a virtual roll-call of her prey "ordained by God of which she was one among and separate from." This is a further statement of guilt. Then he "reached to hold what cannot be held," which is the spirit of the wolf. What is left of the passage is mostly spent on elaborating on the concept of that spirit. It was "terrible and of great beauty, like flowers that feed on flesh." As the emotion gets higher, punctuation lessens and what comes out is a Hemingway-like burst of thought. It can shape rock "surely if wind can, if rain can." "But which cannot be held never held and is no flower but is swift and a huntress and the wind itself is in terror of it and the world cannot lose it." This demonstrates how McCarthy thinks of that spirit and how the main character realizes these things through his guilt and remorse. The main character gets increasingly emotional and philosophical as the author relates. Although there are no

quotation marks, any tags on the thoughts stating that they are those of the main character, it is obvious through McCarthy's style.

### Sample D Paraphrased Grader Observations

- The writer clearly knows something about the novel, as guilt cannot be easily inferred from the passage. However, even though it is relevant in context of the larger work, it is sometimes a stretch when discussing this passage.
- Some of the evidence fits the thesis. Some less so.
- The allusions to other works and writers don't really work, except with the comparison to Hemingway's prose style.
- The analysis is thin, and some of what passes for analysis is assertion.
- The writer seems to understand more than is conveyed in the actual writing. [My observation: *An actual conclusion does wonders for clarifying your point.*]
- [My observation: *This is a mid-tier essay (5-6). It is less precise, focused, and well-supported. The structure is simplistic, and the writer tries to shoe-horn in some evidence to fit a rigid thesis. The shout-outs to other writers bother me more than the grader. They impress no one and seem only to exist so that the writer can brag about having read other unrelated texts.*]

### Q3: Prompt

The eighteenth-century British novelist Laurence Sterne wrote, "No body, 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, obligations, or influences. Then, in a well-organized essay, identify each of the two conflicting forces and explain how this conflict with one character illuminates the meaning of the work as a whole. You may use one of the novels or plays listed below or another novel or work of similar literary quality.

### Q3: Sample E

*Ceremony* is Leslie Marmon Silko's coming-of-age novel of a Native American man who must confront his ethnic heritage in order to mature and discover purpose in life. Tayo, the main character, must deal with two conflicting obligations and influences. His first obligation is to his Native-American heritage, as his family members urge him to keep the ceremonies alive. He is also obligated to protect himself, from friends, haunting memories, and authorities. The conflict between these obligations in Tayo's life are eventually resolved by his ability to integrate past and present, illuminating the theme that it is necessary to draw on one's past to resolve the problems of today. Silko illustrates this meaning through the character of Ts'eh and her actions, through the integration of myths, stories, songs, and poems into the novel, and by emphasizing the Native American view of time as circular in nature.

Tayo's character is best described as conflicted. He must cope with flashbacks and nightmares from the Vietnam War, and is hospitalized for his mental problems. For a time he turns to alcohol as a release from his problems, and Silko uses this experience as an opportunity to represent the problems on an Indian Reservation, especially alcoholism.

With help from Josiah and Medicine Men, Tayo begins to learn more about his ethnic heritage and begins to feel the obligation to participate in the Laguna Pueblo ceremonies. However, Tayo is hesitant to commit himself to the influences of the past, and often escapes by drinking and picking up women with his friends. These experiences develop into his other obligation, to protect himself from friends who turned against him. The only influence that Tayo does commit to is Ts'eh, the woman he met after being beaten by white ranch hands. He spends a summer with her, living in a cave and learning important traditions from her. She teaches him about gathering herbs & flowers for ceremonies, as well as explaining cliff drawings to him. But she represents more than his obligation to learn about his heritage, because she keeps him safe from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, as well as his enemies. Ts'eh allows Tayo to reach a compromise among the conflicting influences in his life, as she helps him develop as an individual, while still keeping his ethnic heritage in a prominent place in his life. This relates to the novel's meaning as a whole because under Ts'eh guidance, Tayo deals with conflicting issues while maturing throughout the story.

Silko's use of myths and stories interspersed with traditional discourse illustrates the combination of past and present. These myths are important in the ceremonies Tayo performs, fulfilling obligations to his heritage. But they also function as allegories of the action in the novel. When Emo dies, Tayo's grandmother remarks that although the names change, the stories stay the same. In this way, the use of myths, stories and songs represents Tayo's obligation to the past, but also show that the present (or traditional discourse) can co-exist with the past (myths).

The conclusion of *Ceremony* includes references to Los Alamos, the atomic bomb, and uranium. Silko uses these references to illustrate the Native American idea of time as circular because the atomic bomb represents continuing destruction. Through varying time schemes, Silko reveals that the events in Tayo's life are circular, as he must return to the past before he can go on. The use of circular time through the novel integrates the past & present influences on Tayo and his ability to connect past & present to solve conflicts.

Tayo is pulled by different people to fulfill obligations to his heritage and to himself throughout *Ceremony*. In the end, Tayo resolves these conflicting influences by using the lessons of his past to mature and develop into a happy, healthy, and un-threatened man.

### Sample E Paraphrased Grader Observations

- Though the writer uses a three point structure, it does not read as mechanical or formulaic. It also moves chronologically through the novel, choosing evidence that illustrates the characters growth and maturation.
- The evidence is set up well, with enough context for it to make sense, but without the essay turning into a plot summary. At the same time, the reader never gets lost, even if not one hundred percent familiar with the work. [My observation: *This writer uses the introduction very well in this regard. Outlining the overall thrust of the novel and the main conflict frees up the rest of the essay for analysis, rather than summary. Nonetheless the writer never forgets to help the reader to understand the context for the evidence.*]
- The writer's understanding of the themes in the novel is unusually mature for a student essay. It is insightful and teaches the reader something very important about the novel.
- Any grammatical errors are minor and clearly a product of haste.
- [My observation: *This is an upper-tier essay (7-9). The thing is, I think many of you are capable of doing better on the Q3 than this. I hope you prove me right.*]