

**UIL**  
**Student Activities Conference**  
**2009-2010**

## **Literary Criticism**

**New to the Contest? Let's Get Familiar:  
A Very Basic Introductory Session for Both Students and Coaches**

The UIL Literary Criticism contest encourages students who have an inclination to probe and analyze literature to further explore with a bit more intensity, to enjoy in a fuller sense what the literature offers the careful reader, and to engage the literature in a manner that ensures intellectual satisfaction.

Time constraints and basic logistical considerations drive the format of the test itself; it is a multiple-choice test, and while having an arguably objective answer to a question must be considered a good thing, something seems amiss. A strong encouragement of informed subjective responses to literature usually characterizes the good classroom, and to reduce literary analysis to a multiple-choice format belies the ambiguity upon which imaginative literature often depends. So it is with some trepidation that I create a bank of "answers" from which the student must choose the correct response to a question addressing a work of literature. Certainly, many aspects of literary analysis can be engaged in a manner that allows for one objective answer; however, many—and some of the more interesting aspects—do not, which is not to say that these aspects will not be addressed. Indeed, an objective approach to what might otherwise enjoy many interpretations should encourage a closer reading and thus better preparation for the contest.

The nurturing of a student's ability to find meaning in the written word, and in imaginative literature especially, is vital to his or her education. To find additional avenues that both encourage and reinforce this nurturing constitutes a challenge in and of itself. I believe that the UIL Literary Criticism contest can serve high school students, freshmen through seniors, in the classroom-initiated search for that additional avenue. Through guided preparation for the spring contests, the interested young reader hones the skills that ensure that an enjoyable reading of a poem, novel, or play become part of an intellectual journey through our literary heritage.

Welcome to Literary Criticism! The challenge can be its own reward, over and above that which can be gained by engaging, with a focused interest—and with your team members and coach—the literary work of Sophocles, Samuel Butler, and Thomas Hardy.

## Academics - LITERARY CRITICISM CONTEST

Mark Bernier, State Contest Director  
mbernier@blinn.edu

### Contest Rules

The rules for all UIL Academic contests are found in the *UIL Constitution and Contest Rules (C&CR)*, which can be found online. Students and coaches new to Literary Criticism should become familiar with the rules found in Section 940 of the *C&CR* online.

The **UIL Literary Criticism Contest** is a ninety-minute contest in which the student's familiarity with the concepts associated with literary analysis and the authors and works that represent primarily English-language literary history is assessed.

Three sections comprise the scored part of the test; a *required* tie-breaking essay that invites the student to exercise his or her skill in literary analysis completes the test.

### Part I: Knowledge of Literary Terms and Literary History

The first part of the test, a bank of thirty multiple-choice items, is drawn from the Harmon-Holman *Handbook to Literature* 10e. While the *Handbook* is fairly exhaustive in its coverage of literary terms and literary history fundamental to the study of the western literary canon, this section's thirty items cover the terms, movements, genres, and events most likely encountered in a serious approach to the wide range of literary concepts, literary works, and critical approaches that characterize western, especially though not exclusively, British and American literary history.

The main part of the *Handbook* is an alphabetically listed set of definitions and descriptors; from these definitions and descriptors are drawn roughly ten to twelve items.

Among the *Handbook's* appendices are lists of the recipients of the Nobel Prize for Literature, the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama; from these lists are pulled upwards of eight items. Knowledge of these authors' contributions as referenced in the *Handbook's* alphabetized discussions can prove productive.

The remainder of the items constituting the first section, numbering usually ten to twelve, test the student's knowledge of literary history. These items assess the student's familiarity with the chronologies of both the British and the American literary canons as offered by the *Handbook*, both in its multipage chronology and in its brief discussions of literary movements, literary groups, and critical approaches to the study of literature.

### Part II: The UIL Reading List (differs year to year)

The reading list has traditionally consisted of a novel, a drama, and a selection of poems, though from time to time a set of representative short stories has replaced the novel on the list.

The 2009-2010 list includes Samuel Butler's *Erewhon, or Over the Range*, Sophocles' *Antigoné*, and the selection of Thomas Hardy's poetry found in the *Mentor Anthology of British Poets*. (See reading list.)

Twenty items, fairly evenly divided, test the student's familiarity with the events, the major thematic concerns, the characterization, and, in the case of the poetry, the technique for which the works are noted. Interpretation as a testable consideration is minimized, if for no other reason than to forestall any ambiguity that could be especially problematic in a multiple-choice test. Historical context as dictated by the themes and the plotlines should be considered eligible: topical allusions are an important aspect of an author's intellectual exchange with his or her audience. Literary biography, unless it is immediately concerned with the literature under investigation, while important, will not be tested.

### Part III: Ability in Literary Criticism

The final fifteen items assess the student's ability in literary criticism. Upwards of six selections, *in toto* or excerpted, are provided for analysis. Three to four items, usually, per selection or excerpt ask the student to recognize or understand the literature; the analytical tools represented by the concepts that are covered in the *Handbook* and that are often exercised in analysis and discussion of literature to a depth often accomplished in the review of the literature listed on the UIL Reading List are thus applied.

### Part IV: The Tie-Breaking Prompt

The directions provided for the tie-breaking prompt suffice:

Contestants who do not write an essay will be disqualified even if they are not involved in any tie.

Essays that do not demonstrate a sincere effort to discuss the assigned topic will be disqualified. The judge(s) should note carefully this criterion when breaking ties: ranking of essays for tie-breaking purposes should be based primarily on how well the topic has been addressed.

Three pages of blank paper have been provided for this essay; however, it is not expected that the essay will be longer than 150 words.

## Sample Items from the 2009 Season

1. An inappropriateness of speech resulting from the use of one word for another that resembles it is known as a(n)
  - A) Erastianism.
  - B) Euphemism.
  - C) Grundyism.
  - D) Malapropism.
  - E) Spoonerism.
  
2. The 1977 recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for *Divine Comedies: Poems*, which, in part, reflects his unorthodox use of the Ouija board, is
  - A) John Ashberry.
  - B) Yusef Komunyakaa.
  - C) James Merrill.
  - D) Henry Taylor.
  - E) Charles Wright.
  
3. Not characteristic of a Senecan tragedy is the
  - A) conventional five-act division.
  - B) depiction of the domestic life of common people.
  - C) extensive use of soliloquy for characterization.
  - D) highly rhetorical style marked by hyperbole.
  - E) sensational, often "blood-lust" material.
  
4. The Jewish-American author of *Seize the Day*, *Henderson the Rain King*, *Herzog*, *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, *The Actual*, and *Humboldt's Gift*, the last of which earned the author the 1976 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, is
  - A) Saul Bellow.
  - B) Mark Harris.
  - C) Norman Mailer.
  - D) Bernard Malamud.
  - E) Philip Roth.

5. In responding to Regina's having called him a "good loser," Ben says, "I'm not discouraged. The century's turning, the world is open. [. . .] There are hundreds of Hubbards sitting in rooms like this throughout the country. All their names aren't Hubbard, but [. . .] they will own this country some day." Ben's words suggest Hellman's personal attitude concerning
- A) familial greed.
  - B) greed and the unchecked capitalism.
  - C) the infusion of Northern capital into the South.
  - D) nineteenth-century Southern aristocracy.
  - E) the Old South's return to power.
6. Often anthologized under the title "The Wanderer," Auden's "Something Is Bound to Happen" exhibits a number of elements characterizing Old English poetics, including the kenning (line 10) and alliteration; however, there is, in the summing-up, a suggestion that it is, in Auden's own words, "our eternal duty to be happy," certainly a contrast to the elegiac tone of the original Old English poem "The Wanderer." The tone of Auden's poem might thus be recognized as
- A) classical stoicism.
  - B) optimistic fatalism.
  - C) renewed optimism.
  - D) steadfast realism.
  - E) unquestioned Calvinism.
7. Not among the several stages or processes delineated in Freytag's Pyramid is the
- A) catastrophe.
  - B) climax.
  - C) complication(s).
  - D) exposition.
  - E) relief scene.
8. The author of *Satanic Verses*, *The Ground beneath Her Feet*, *The Jaguar Smile*, and, as a writer of magical realism, *Midnight's Children*, is
- A) John Barth.
  - B) John Fowles.
  - C) Thomas Pynchon.
  - D) Salman Rushdie.
  - E) Graham Swift.

9. The group of American writers of the '50s and '60s in rebellion against what they conceived of as the failures of American culture is the
- A) Agrarians.
  - B) Angry Young Men.
  - C) Beat Generation.
  - D) Lollards.
  - E) Muckrakers.
10. Not to be found sitting together engaged in a hypothetical discussion about any nominees for the Nobel Prize for Literature would be
- A) Kate Chopin.
  - B) Emily Dickenson.
  - C) William Dean Howells.
  - D) Henry James.
  - E) Edith Wharton.
11. The Russian émigré whose books include *Lolita* and *Pale Fire* and who turned ninety this year is
- A) Joseph Brodsky.
  - B) Vladimir Nabokov.
  - C) Boris L. Pasternak.
  - D) Mikhail A. Sholokhov.
  - E) Alexander I. Solzhenitsyn.
12. The concern conveyed in the confession, "I have long shrunk from children, because they often show a distrust,—a backwardness to be familiar with me. I have even been afraid of little Pearl!" is given voice by
- A) the Black Man to Mistress Hibbins.
  - B) Dimmesdale to Hester.
  - C) Hester to Chillingworth.
  - D) Hester to Dimmesdale.
  - E) Mistress Hibbins to the Black Man.
13. Sharon Peeples's untitled poem (below)

combing my hair—  
the face in the mirror  
is my mother's

is an example of a(n)

- A) haiku.
- B) odelet.
- C) senryu.
- D) surrealism.
- E) triolet.

**Items 14-17: W. H. Auden's**

**The Novelist**

Encased in talent like a uniform,  
The rank of every poet is well known;  
They can amaze us like a thunderstorm,  
Or die so young, or live for years alone.  
They can dash forward like hussars: but he  
Must struggle out of his boyish gift and learn  
How to be plain and awkward, how to be  
One after whom none think it worth to turn.

For, to achieve his lightest wish, he must  
Become the whole of boredom, subject to  
Vulgar complaints like love, among the Just

Be just, among the Filthy filthy too,  
And in his own weak person, if he can,  
Must suffer dully all the wrongs of Man.

- 14.** The simile found in line 5 of Auden's "The Novelist" compares
- A) novelists to hussars.
  - B) novelists to poets.
  - C) poets to crashing thunderstorms.
  - D) poets to dashing European light cavalry.
  - E) poets to uniformed novelists.
- 15.** In lines 11 and 12, the repetition in close proximity of the same word but in a different grammatical case, as in "Just / Be just" and "the Filthy filthy too" constitutes one form of the rhetorical scheme
- A) anaphora.
  - B) dualism.
  - C) polyptoton.
  - D) reduplication.
  - E) secondary stress.
- 16.** The antecedent of the third-person personal pronoun "he" in the fifth line of Auden's "The Novelist" is the
- A) boy.
  - B) hussar.
  - C) novelist.
  - D) poet.
  - E) reader.
- 17.** The persona's attitude toward the novelist's vocation is
- A) condescending.
  - B) detached.
  - C) envious.
  - D) generous.
  - E) snarky.

**Items 18-20 refer to Philip Larkin's**

**Talking in Bed**

Talking in bed ought to be easiest,  
Lying together there goes back so far,  
An emblem of two people being honest.

Yet more and more time passes silently.  
Outside, the wind's incomplete unrest  
Builds and disperses clouds in the sky,

And dark towns heap up on the horizon.  
None of this cares for us. Nothing shows why  
At this unique distance from isolation

It becomes still more difficult to find  
Words at once true and kind,  
Or not untrue and not unkind.

- 18.** The rhyme scheme of Larkin's "Talking in Bed" is
- A) aba cbd ded fff.
  - B) aba aba aba aba.
  - C) aba bab cdc eee.
  - D) aba bcb cdc eee.
  - E) aba cac dcd eee.
- 19.** The final line of the Larkin's "Talking in Bed" offers two examples of
- A) a complication.
  - B) double dactyls.
  - C) double entendre.
  - D) litotes.
  - E) a palindrome.
- 20.** The pairing of lines 9 and 10 of the poem is known as
- A) analysis.
  - B) enjambment.
  - C) exegesis.
  - D) grotesque.
  - E) modulation.

#### Part IV: Tie-Breaking Essay

Note well: Contestants who do not write an essay will be disqualified even if they are not involved in any tie.

Note well: Essays that do not demonstrate a sincere effort to discuss the assigned topic will be disqualified. The judge(s) should note carefully this criterion when breaking ties: ranking of essays for tie-breaking purposes should be based primarily on how well the topic has been addressed.

Three pages of blank paper have been provided for this essay; however, it is not expected that the essay will be longer than 150 words.

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Often a parody is powerful because it addresses affairs of current importance or interest. Compose an essay that comments on/analyzes the honor-money and mistress-sports fans dichotomies set up by Gene Fehler's parody of Richard Lovelace's seventeenth-century poem, "To Lucasta, Going to the Wars."

##### To Lucasta, Going to the Wars

Tell me not, sweet, I am unkind  
That from the nunnery\*  
Of thy chaste breast and quiet mind  
To war and arms I fly.

\*sheltering refuge

True, a new mistress\* now I chase,  
The first foe of the field;  
And with a stronger faith embrace  
A sword, a horse, a shield.

\*sweetheart, significant other, lover

Yet this inconstancy is such  
As you too shall adore;  
I could not love thee, dear, so much,  
Loved I not honor more.

Richard Lovelace  
1649

##### To My Fans, on Becoming a Free Agent \*

Tell me not, fans, I am unkind  
For saying my good-bye  
And leaving your kind cheers behind  
While I to new fans fly.

\*a professional athlete who is free to  
negotiate a contract with any team

True, I have lost your sweet embrace  
While on your rival's field;  
But I have viewed the market place  
And seen what it can yield.

Though my disloyalty is such  
That all you fans abhor,  
It's not that I don't love you much:  
I just love money more.

Gene Fehler  
1991

## Part IV: Tie-Breaking Essay

These notes are not intended to be understood as a key for the Tie-Breaking essay prompt; rather, they should serve the judge(s) as a presentation of critical ideas that might appear in an essay responding to the prompt.

Criteria for judging the Tie-Breaking Essay SHOULD include

- the degree to which the instructions have been followed,
- the quality of the critical insight offered in response to the selection,
- the overall effectiveness of the written discussion, and
- the grammatical correctness of the essay.

Note well that the quality of the contestant's critical insight is more important than the contestant's prose style. In short, the Literary Criticism contest is one that promotes the critical analysis of literature. The quality of the writing, which should never go unappreciated, does not trump evidence of critical analysis.

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### Critical Notes on an Analysis of Lovelace's "To Lucasta" and Fehler's Parody

Literary concepts that MIGHT be used by the contestant in a discussion of these poems include

- alliteration
- apostrophe
- inversion
- euphemism
- metonymy
- sight/eye rhyme

Fehler's parody suggests that the field on which honor is achieved is no longer the battle field but the sports field and, additionally, that fidelity might well be relative.

The juxtaposing of honor, an abstraction, with money, a representation of materialism, suggests moral decline—despite the paradoxical underlying reality that people die in wars in which men act honorably and people don't die (as a matter of course) on fields of dreams or in sports stadiums, where money seems to be the driving force behind the offering of oneself up for the glory of winning.

The contestant might recognize that the leaving of one "mistress" for another is, in any estimation, a question of fidelity. The same might be argued in the case of a team member and his loyalty to the fans under whose "kind cheers" that athlete has achieved his fame.

The commentary might rely on an item-by-item analysis in which the honor-money dichotomy and the mistress-sports fans dichotomy are recognized as the pivotal points of comparison.

Another approach has the two dichotomies acting as support for a thesis that notes that each poet recognizes the importance (fidelity) that men give achievement and glory—in short, significance—in the public arena (on either of the two fields) in comparison to the comparably slight importance (fidelity) associated with the private sphere: one's lover or one's hometown fans.

The perspicacious and culturally alert contestant might find the unfortunately interesting Pat Tillman story suggestively apropos.

#### Part IV: Tie-Breaking Essay (required)

Note well: Contestants who do not write an essay will be disqualified even if they are not involved in any tie.

Note well: Any essay that does not demonstrate a sincere effort to discuss the assigned topic will be disqualified. The judge(s) should note carefully this criterion when breaking ties: ranking of essays for tie-breaking purposes should be based primarily on how well the topic has been addressed.

Three pages of blank paper have been provided for this essay; however, it is not expected that the essay will be longer than 150 words.

Read the nineteenth-century English romantic Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ozymandias" and the medieval Persian poet Sheikh Sa'di's [A Vision of the Sultan Mahmud] and offer an analytical discussion of the shared theme.

#### Ozymandias

I met a traveller from an antique land  
Who said:—Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
Stand in the desert. Near them on the sand,  
Half sunk, a shatter'd visage lies, whose frown  
And wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command  
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
Which yet survive, stamp'd on these lifeless things,  
The hand that mock'd them and the heart that fed.  
And on the pedestal these words appear:  
"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:  
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!"  
Nothing beside remains: round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Percy Bysshe Shelley  
1817

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#### [A Vision of Sultan Mahmud]

Many famous men have been buried under ground  
Of whose existence on earth not a trace has remained  
And that old corpse which had been surrendered to the earth  
Was so consumed by the soil that not a bone remains.  
The glorious name of Nushirvan survives in good repute  
Although much time elapsed since he passed away.  
Do good, O man, and consider life as a good fortune,  
The more so, as when a shout is raised, a man exists no more.

Sheikh Sa'di  
1258  
trans. Edward Rehatse

#### Part IV: Tie-Breaking Essay

These notes are not intended to be understood as a key for the Tie-Breaking essay prompt; rather, they should serve the judge(s) as a presentation of critical ideas that might appear in an essay responding to the prompt.

Criteria for judging the Tie-Breaking Essay SHOULD include

- the degree to which the instructions have been followed,
- the quality of the critical insight offered in response to the selection,
- the overall effectiveness of the written discussion, and
- the grammatical correctness of the essay.

Note well that the quality of the contestant's critical insight is more important than the contestant's prose style. In short, the Literary Criticism contest is one that promotes the critical analysis of literature. The quality of the writing, which should never go unappreciated, does not trump evidence of critical analysis.

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#### Critical Notes on Shelley's "Ozymandias" and Sa'di's [A Vision of Sultan Mahmud]

Literary concepts that MIGHT be used by the contestant in a discussion of these poems include

- diction (word choice),
- imagery,
- irony,
- simile,
- tone (word choice),
- explicit moral statement (Sa'di), and
- implicit moral statement (Shelley).

The prompt asks the contestant to address the poems' common theme, which involves a recognition that the power as well as the glory (empire in the case of Ozymandias; reputation in the case of Nushirvan) acquired during a person's time on earth are indeed as fleeting as any material goods.

The contestant's approach might be a simplistic comparison of the poems as vehicles to carry the theme, or the approach might recognize the difference between a Western traveler's physical journey to a point where the past speaks to the present (coincidentally, a geographic point in the East) and in the case of Mahmud's vision, a journey that is not actually physical but does involve specific imagery of the physical body's "surrender to the earth"—the past, in Mahmud's vision being less remote and the geography more immediate.

Additionally, a more sophisticated contrast (though generalized) might be drawn between the Westerner's need for an empirical, perhaps literal, vehicle for the transitory nature of man's endeavors (what we build falls down) and the Easterner's appreciation of the parable—the less literal (a dream vision sufficing).

Optimism pervades both poems' messages: Shelley's is couched in the irony that feared strength suffers demise even though it speaks the strength of endurance ("Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair"), and Sa'di's optimism is proffered as a *raison d'être*: live a good life ("Do good, O man, and consider life as a good fortune").