Things I Learned From Grading AP Essays
By LISA FLUET

RECENTLY, I and several thousand other university faculty members and high-school teachers traveled to Louisville, Ky., to read and grade essay answers on the 2010 Advanced Placement exams in English literature and English language, administered by the Educational Testing Service. What follows is a brief account of some of the highlights of this weeklong adventure in assessment.

Question 2 on this year’s English-literature exam asked high-school students to analyze an excerpt describing Clarence Hervey, a central character in Maria Edgeworth’s 1801 novel, Belinda, in terms of “such literary techniques as tone, point of view, and language.”

Most-often-cited Belinda passage in student essays: “His chameleon character seemed to vary in different lights, and according to the different passions in which he happened to be placed.”

To many essay writers, this made Clarence seem a “player” (as one student noted), lacking sincerity and a willingness to commit (like so many men today, lamented several writers), and in need of the authentic, transformative “love” that Belinda can inspire. For others, this prompted lengthy definitions of what a chameleon is, and one notable, unintentionally apropos discussion of Clarence’s fear of predators.

Least-often-cited Belinda passage (three times, in 800-plus essays): “Young ladies who have the misfortune to commit themselves to the firm.”

The artful dame alluded to here is Mrs. Stanhope, the novel’s “catch-match-maker,” who is involved in trying to get the eponymous protagonist wed already. I liked when students invoked this passage, if only that genre of student comments some—I, for one, did!—had the potential to leave me feeling happy about the writer’s use of language.

TheHangover

READING 800-plus Advanced Placement essays at a table of other people doing the same thing tends to inspire waves of correctorial comments of the “kids say the darndest/insults/objects of derision” variety. Not sure, as a teacher, how I feel about the “inane” Century Congo that was the context for this passage as an instance of chiasmus, using the word in an essay that would compel me to dwell more deeply on rhetorical tropes that I’ve just learned. Yet no student/Did this, and this did/frustrate my attempts to leave the correcting tables with bonus cocktail-hour money.

The anticipated proficiency was missing, however—read the whole exam and found only, “Oh, you betcha.”

Disappointed.

I keep going back to Edgeworth’s Belinda. In a weird way, I identify with Mrs. Stanhope, “a well-bred woman, accomplished in that branch of knowledge, which is called the art of rising in the world, [who] had, with but a small fortune, contrived to live in the highest company.”

To adapt Edgeworth’s metaphor, we might think of the AP English-literature examinee and examiner as partners thrown together in the highly speculative enterprise of literary study. While grading, we were periodically gently reminded that each anonymous essay represents not just prose in need of timely assessment, but the critical efforts of someone’s student.

Consequently, I often recalled my own position, 18 years ago, as a silent partner of the patient grader who evaluated my earnest essay on Tillie Olsen’s short story “I Stand Here Ironing.” Certainly a very different story, with a narrator willing to articulate only the bare-minimum desire that her daughter might not always feel helpless. I thought of the story whenever I discovered indications of test-taking helplessness: blank answer booklets, doodles, and the occasional polite, one-sentence answer: “I’m sorry—I don’t know how to do this.”

Those white flags reminded me how insulated we graders were from the capacity to help in more immediate, responsive ways, as a teacher would, with the questions, problems, confusion, and occasional breakthroughs animating the classrooms that produced our very silent partners.

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