

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 situations 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 be conducted by these artful dames, are always supposed to be partners in all the speculations, though their names may not appear in 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 because they wanted to indicate the possibility that the otherwise flawlessly virtuous *Belinda* might be a "silent partner," so to speak, in the "firm" founded for the purpose of "bagging her man."

Here's a game you can play when correcting more than 800 essay answers on *Belinda* at a table of six other quietly reading people: Everyone puts a dollar in the middle of the table. One person starts off the game by picking a word that could occasionally crop up in a student essay. Then everyone continues reading, and the first person to find the word in an essay gets the pot and gets to pick the next word. Note: You shouldn't pick a

word that occurs all the time—that's reserved for the "sudden death" round. Some words that we played with: "Victorian" (popular choice among earnest, but misinformed, historically minded students) and "fickle" (occasionally attributed to that inconsistent wanker, Clarence Hervey). The game stalled for four straight days, sadly, when the winner (for "fickle") picked "chiasmus." Nice job, Mr. Smarty-Pants.

The definition of "chiasmus," which I surreptitiously looked up on my iPhone: "A rhetorical inversion of the second of two parallel structures, as in 'Each throat/Was parched, and glazed each eye' (Samuel Taylor Coleridge).

So, in *Belinda*, "consequently he saw *Belinda* almost every day, and every day he saw her with increasing admiration of her beauty" could be a chiasmus. I guess. And a student could, theoretically, discuss 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.

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/silliest/inane things" variety. Not sure, as a teacher, how I feel about the "inane" part. I mean, there's usually some kind of interpretive effort going on, even in uninspired comments like this one: "Language and tone are really important to conveying meaning."

I had much stronger negative feelings, actually, about the reader next to me who read aloud examples of that genre of student comment somewhat snarkily every 30 seconds or so. And note to that reader: Table etiquette dictates that when you fart at the table (yes, I know it was you), you should *own* it, at the very least. You should *not* frown like you're thinking really hard, and then get up and walk away from your own emanation.

Talks I skipped: Billy Collins (poet) and Scott Huler (nonfiction author who writes about infrastructure). Bought Huler's book, though.

Some new vocabulary I learned, and some things students asked me to contemplate as a reader of their essays:

"Dead ass" means "very serious." Example:

"Dude, are you serious?"

"Dude, I'm dead ass."

The short, imperative answer to an essay question pertaining to exile: "See *Lord of the Flies*."

A self-important character can be very "egotestic." Such a character may also be guilty of "hipocracy" (government by the hips, for the hips). Tone and irony can be very "lucifying" in making these attributes clear to readers.

People Clarence Hervey can be unfavorably contrasted to: Mr. Darcy, Holden Caulfield, Macbeth.

"For Narnia!" "Don't think about zebras [sic]," "Hi AP graders!," and "Blame the media" can all serve as side commentary in student essays, and occasionally as the entire essay answer.

"What happens in Africa stays in Africa." Found this in a student-essay answer on *Heart of Darkness*, in an essay booklet to which a somewhat prudish fellow reader had appended, via Post-it, this promising note: "Contains profane language and flip-pant tone." I agree that likening King Leopold's effect on the late-19th-century Congo to, say, the theme animating the plot of *The Hangover* is pretty flippant. But the student managed an accurate reading otherwise.

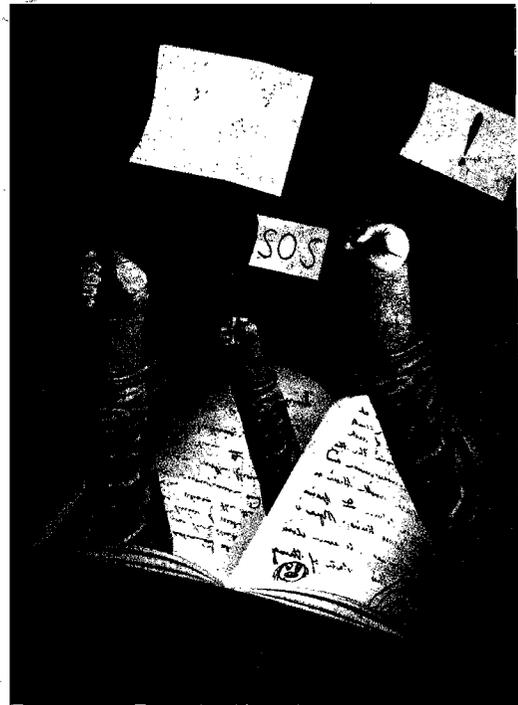
The anticipated profanity was missing, however—read the whole exam and found only, "Oh, you betcha." Disappointed.

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."

After all, I took the AP exam myself, as a tentative first step toward establishing an "accomplished" status in "that branch of knowledge" called literary studies. And I am attempting to "place" young critical writers within our discipline's complex curricular hierarchy.

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 artic-



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ulate 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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