
AP[®] English Literature and Composition

Sample Student Responses and Scoring Commentary Set 1

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Free-Response Question 1

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Question 1: Poetry Analysis

6 points

In Colleen McElroy’s poem “Monologue for Saint Louis,” published in 1980, the speaker returns to her childhood home in St. Louis, Missouri, after an extended absence and contemplates how she has changed. Read the poem carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how McElroy uses literary elements and techniques to convey the speaker’s complex experience of returning home.

In your response you should do the following:

- Respond to the prompt with a thesis that presents a defensible interpretation.
- Select and use evidence to support your line of reasoning.
- Explain how the evidence supports your line of reasoning.
- Use appropriate grammar and punctuation in communicating your argument.

Reporting Category	Scoring Criteria	
Row A Thesis (0–1 points)	0 points For any of the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is no defensible thesis. The intended thesis only restates the prompt. The intended thesis provides a summary of the issue with no apparent or coherent claim. There is a thesis, but it does not respond to the prompt. 	1 point Responds to the prompt with a thesis that presents a defensible interpretation of the poem.
	Decision Rules and Scoring Notes	
	Responses that do not earn this point: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Only restate the prompt. Make a generalized comment about the poem that doesn't respond to the prompt. Describe the poem or features of the poem rather than making a claim that requires a defense. 	Responses that earn this point: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide a defensible interpretation of the speaker's complex experience of returning home.
	Examples that do not earn this point: Restate the prompt <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>"The poem 'Monologue for Saint Louis' depicts a speaker contemplating her return home and how she has changed."</i> Do not relate to the prompt <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>"St. Louis has a large national monument, commonly known as the Arch."</i> Describe the poem or features of the poem <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>"The intentional lack of capitalization is significant in conveying the poem's meaning."</i> 	Examples that earn this point: Provide a defensible interpretation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>"The speaker in McElroy's poem is filled with both nostalgia and regret upon returning home."</i> <i>"In the poem, the speaker's return home is full of paradoxes—her experience is sweet and rotten, familiar and strange, a return and a visit to a new place. It is through her love of words that she is able to reconcile her bittersweet experience."</i> <i>"Through repetition and the absence of punctuation, McElroy reveals that the speaker's visit home is marked by moments of recognition as well as disorientation."</i>
	Additional Notes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The thesis may be more than one sentence, provided the sentences are in close proximity. The thesis may be anywhere within the response. For a thesis to be defensible, the poem must include at least minimal evidence that <i>could</i> be used to support that thesis; however, the student need not cite that evidence to earn the thesis point. The thesis <i>may</i> establish a line of reasoning that structures the essay, but it needn't do so to earn the thesis point. A thesis that meets the criteria can be awarded the point whether or not the rest of the response successfully supports that line of reasoning. 	

Reporting Category	Scoring Criteria				
Row B Evidence AND Commentary (0–4 points)	0 points Simply restates thesis (if present), repeats provided information, or offers information irrelevant to the prompt.	1 point EVIDENCE: Provides evidence that is mostly general. AND COMMENTARY: Summarizes the evidence but does not explain how the evidence supports the student’s argument.	2 points EVIDENCE: Provides some specific, relevant evidence. AND COMMENTARY: Explains how some of the evidence relates to the student’s argument, but no line of reasoning is established, or the line of reasoning is faulty.	3 points EVIDENCE: Provides specific evidence to support all claims in a line of reasoning. AND COMMENTARY: Explains how some of the evidence supports a line of reasoning. AND Explains how at least one literary element or technique in the poem contributes to its meaning.	4 points EVIDENCE: Provides specific evidence to support all claims in a line of reasoning. AND COMMENTARY: Consistently explains how the evidence supports a line of reasoning. AND Explains how multiple literary elements or techniques in the poem contribute to its meaning.
	Decision Rules and Scoring Notes				
	Typical responses that earn 0 points: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are incoherent or do not address the prompt. May be just opinion with no textual references or references that are irrelevant. 	Typical responses that earn 1 point: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tend to focus on summary or description of a poem rather than specific details or techniques. Mention literary elements, devices, or techniques with little or no explanation. 	Typical responses that earn 2 points: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consist of a mix of specific evidence and broad generalities. May contain some simplistic, inaccurate, or repetitive explanations that don’t strengthen the argument. May make one point well but either do not make multiple supporting claims or do not adequately support more than one claim. Do not explain the connections or progression between the student’s claims, so a line of reasoning is not clearly established. 	Typical responses that earn 3 points: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Uniformly offer evidence to support claims. Focus on the importance of specific words and details from the poem to build an interpretation. Organize an argument as a line of reasoning composed of multiple supporting claims. Commentary may fail to integrate some evidence or fail to support a key claim. 	Typical responses that earn 4 points: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Uniformly offer evidence to support claims. Focus on the importance of specific words and details from the poem to build an interpretation. Organize and support an argument as a line of reasoning composed of multiple supporting claims, each with adequate evidence that is clearly explained. Explain how the writer’s use of multiple literary techniques contributes to the student’s interpretation of the poem.
Additional Notes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Writing that suffers from grammatical and/or mechanical errors that interfere with communication cannot earn the fourth point in this row. To earn the fourth point in this row, the response may observe multiple instances of the same literary element or technique if each instance further contributes to the meaning of the poem. 					

Reporting Category	Scoring Criteria	
Row C Sophistication (0–1 points)	0 points Does not meet the criteria for one point.	1 point Demonstrates sophistication of thought and/or develops a complex literary argument.
	Decision Rules and Scoring Notes	
	Responses that do not earn this point: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attempt to contextualize their interpretation, but such attempts consist predominantly of sweeping generalizations (“<i>Human experiences always include ...</i>” OR “<i>In a world where ...</i>” OR “<i>Since the beginning of time ...</i>”). Only hint at or suggest other possible interpretations (“<i>While another reader may see ...</i>” OR “<i>Though the poem could be said to ...</i>”). Make a single statement about how an interpretation of the poem comments on something thematic without consistently maintaining that thematic interpretation. Oversimplify complexities in the poem. Use complicated or complex sentences or language that is ineffective because it does not enhance the student’s argument. 	Responses that earn this point may demonstrate a sophistication of thought or develop a complex literary argument by doing any of the following: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying and exploring complexities or tensions within the poem. Illuminating the student’s interpretation by situating it within a broader context. Accounting for alternative interpretations of the poem. Employing a style that is consistently vivid and persuasive.
	Additional Note: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> This point should be awarded only if the sophistication of thought or complex understanding is part of the student’s argument, not merely a phrase or reference. 	

In her poem, "Monologue for Saint Louis," Colleen McElroy uses vivid imagery and symbolism to create a sense of Nostalgia. By using the symbols of grapes and grapevines to juxtapose the warmth of childhood with the relative sterility of adulthood, McElroy explores the sacrifices one makes when they grow.

McElroy heavily utilizes anachronism to frame the speaker's narrative of St. Louis, each warm memory derived from childhood is balanced by a hollow adult experience. This is made clear immediately in the first stanza. When she returns home she remembers the "succulent pockets of flesh laced [grapes] with green staining out lips and fingers." She concedes this warm memory by admitting that "the heart [was] barely there." The imagery of "succulent" grapes with rich "flesh" show the substantive nature of the grapes and therefore the substantive memory of childhood. The "staining" represents the everlasting impact that childhood leaves on people. These full and powerful memories being juxtaposed by an absent heart and the word "choked" show the magnitude of innocence the speaker feels she has lost. Moreover, the grapes are described as "blue-black", but the staining in "green" representing the archetypal truths of life and nourishment associated with the color green. Her ageing shows the loss of this life and inner substance.

As McElroy continues, she leans into the grape metaphor to further exemplify the loss of her childhood innocence. This temporal shift is clear in stanzas two and three. During the first summer, "the arbor was clotted with pockets of grapes latticed on each interlocking vine" but she concedes that this is no longer the case "now...that crumbling heap of rotting black sticks cannot shield us." The speaker represents the departure from childhood through the death of the grapevine. The innocence and warmth that has once acted as a "shield" now has been shattered by the assaults of time and adulthood. The juxtaposition with the earlier "blue-black" and "green" characteristics of the grapes with the now completely "rotting black sticks" shows that the warmth of the grapes has been siphoned by the speaker's choice to leave her childhood home and only when she returns does she fully understand the contrast between her once fulfilling childhood and her sterile adult life.

McElroy builds on the significance of the speaker's return to her home town towards the end of the poem. She explores the broken promise of how "each year [the speaker] vowed to return home forever." It is only when the speaker does attempt to return that she realizes that she's going back to St. Louis *not* "home." The warmth of home has now been uprooted; it's a "vacant lot" with a "stainless-steel arch." She returns home to a "[infected] flat country." The use of words like "vacant," "flat," and "infect" show both the physical corruption of the city she called home and the internal corruption the speaker feels of her idea of home. Likewise, the use of "stainless-steel" describes the sterility that replaced the once fertile and luscious grapes. This epic juxtaposition from the beginning of the poem with fertile grapes and warm feeling of summer shifts with the sterility, sickness, and death towards the end of the poem, showing that the transition from childhood to adulthood too, is as drastic. The speaker chooses to sacrifice her warmth and her home when leaving and only does recognize the true prices of her departure when she returns to a completely transformed St. Louis.

In Colleen McElroy's "Monologue for Saint Louis", the speaker balances the bittersweet emotions she feels regarding her hometown in the summer through various ways that explore her childhood.

The most obvious way that McElroy explores her memories of summer is the fact that this poem does not use uppercase letters excluding the title and when she refers to herself as "I". This immediately gives the poem a more muted and somber tone as opposed to if she wrote it in a more standard form of English. McElroy's emphasis on the capitalized 'I's isolates the speaker from her memories as they exist in a different state from the speaker, both frozen in time and separated by miles of distance. This poem also does not include any punctuation marks, making it seem this monologue is one uninterrupted thought from the speaker, making it all the more raw and heartbreaking to experience her memories. The absence of both of these elements in the poem add to the speaker's somber reflection of her childhood nostalgia and lends a unique understanding to the way she materializes her grief when returning home.

Within the poem itself, McElroy uses many different instances of interconnected phrases to emphasize the speaker's connection with her family and with nature. The speaker's main memories of that summer in St. Louis are defined by the parts of nature that she and her cousin would play around in. The fact that she decides to describe her neighbor's grapes as 'latticed' and 'interlocking' shows the admiration she has for the seemingly mundane aspects of the environment she grew up in (13,14). Her description of the signs along her childhood streets are also described as being "aligned like a lacework" showing both the handiwork and care that show up in ways that others may not appreciate as much as her. The speaker also describes her connection to her cousins as "twisted vines of genetic maps", but not necessarily a family tree (24-25). This shows the uniqueness of their childhood experience and how they experienced it in a way that is not orthodox by any means, but is more meaningful to them nonetheless. All of these seemingly unconnected elements are connected with each other as they they create the tapestry of her childhood memories in so many different aspects. The labyrinth of her neighborhood plus her family 'tree' plus the nature she has become all too familiar with becomes a connected map of her childhood to look upon when a lot of the things that she reminisces upon are lost in the present day.

McElroy's unconventional approach to the structure of poetry and connection of vastly different ideas through similar descriptors all come together to create a map for the speaker to navigate the memories of her hometown and the joys and sorrows that come with it.

In Colleen McElroy's poem, *Monologue for Saint Louis*, she uses incorrect syntax and imagery to show how despite being back home, she feels estranged from it.

The poem lacks periods, it's a long run-on sentence. McElroy leaves out the use of periods to show how the speaker is trying to hang on to her connection toward her home even through words. The lack of periods is comparable to a child wishing for summer to last forever.

McElroy in the third stanza shows how the passage of time changes her home. The arbor is now infested with worms due to her absence. From the first summers she lived at her old home, she and her friends whispered of older women, which she has now turned into.

Question 1

Note: Student samples are quoted verbatim and may contain spelling and grammatical errors.

Overview

NEW for 2025: The question overviews can be found in the *Chief Reader Report on Student Responses on AP Central*.

Sample: 1A

Score: 1-4-1

Row A: Thesis (0–1 points): 1

The essay responds to the prompt with a thesis that presents a defensible interpretation of the poem. The thesis, “By using the symbols of grapes and grapevines to juxtapose the warmth of childhood with the relative sterility of adulthood, McElroy explores the sacrifices one makes when they grow,” appears in the second sentence of the introduction and earned 1 point in Row A.

Row B: Evidence and Commentary (0–4 points): 4

The essay provides specific evidence, compelling commentary, and clear explanations of the use of literary elements in the poem to establish a line of reasoning that focuses on how the nostalgia of childhood contrasts with the reality of adulthood. In paragraph 2, the essay focuses on the memories the speaker recalls from her childhood spent in St. Louis. The evidence, the “succulent pockets of flesh laced [grapes] with green staining out lips and fingers” is followed by commentary that contends “The imagery of ‘succulent’ grapes with rich ‘flesh’ show the substantive nature of the grapes and therefore the substantive memory of childhood” and the “‘staining’ represents the everlasting impact that childhood leaves on people.” In paragraph 3, the essay contends that the speaker “leans into the grape metaphor to further exemplify the loss of her childhood innocence” and makes the observation that “The speaker represents the departure from childhood through the death of the grapevine.” Additionally, the essay points out “the juxtaposition with the earlier ‘blue-black’ and ‘green’ characteristics of the grapes with the now completely ‘rotting black sticks.’” This evidence supports the claim that “only when she returns does she fully understand the contrast between her once fulfilling childhood and her sterile adult life.” Paragraph 4 turns the focus to “the significance of the speaker’s return to her home town” and again fuses specific evidence with insightful commentary: “The use of words like ‘vacant,’ ‘flat,’ and ‘infect’ show both the physical corruption of the city she called home and the internal corruption the speaker feels of her idea of home. Likewise, the use of ‘stainless-steel’ describes the sterility that replaced the once fertile and luscious grapes.” The essay seamlessly weaves the explanation of McElroy’s use of literary techniques, such as imagery, juxtaposition, and metaphor, in a way that clearly explains how they contribute to the meaning of the poem. The misuse of the term “anachronism” does not detract from the overall strength of the essay’s analysis. This essay earned 4 points in Row B.

Row C: Sophistication (0–1 points): 1

The response demonstrates sophistication of thought by identifying and exploring the complexities in the poem. For example, at the end of paragraph 2, the essay asserts “the grapes are described as ‘blue-black’, but the staining in ‘green’ representing the archetypal truths of life and nourishment associated with the color green. Her ageing shows the loss of this life and inner substance.” The essay earned 1 point in Row C.

Question 1 (continued)**Sample: 1B****Score: 1-3-0****Row A: Thesis (0–1 points): 1**

This essay provides a defensible interpretation of the speaker’s complex experience of returning home in the first paragraph of the essay. The thesis, “In Colleen McElroy’s ‘Monologue for Saint Louis’, the speaker balances the bittersweet emotions she feels regarding her hometown in the summer through various ways that explore her childhood,” earned 1 point in Row A.

Row B: Evidence and Commentary (0–4 points): 3

The response provides specific evidence to support all claims in its line of reasoning about the speaker’s hometown memories evoking bittersweet emotions. In paragraph 2, the essay presents evidence of the poem’s unconventional use of punctuation and capitalization, such as “this poem does not use uppercase letters excluding the title and when she refers to herself as ‘I’” and the “poem also does not include any punctuation marks.” This evidence is accompanied by commentary that argues that “McElroy’s emphasis on the capatilized ‘I’s isolates the speaker from her memories as they exist in a different state from the speaker, both frozen in time and separated by miles of distance” and that the lack of punctuation makes “it seem this monologue is one uninterrupted thought from the speaker, making it all the more raw and heartbreaking to experience her memories.” While the evidence and commentary are insightful, they do not effectively support the line of reasoning. The third paragraph explores McElroy’s use of “interconnected phrases to emphasize the speaker’s connection with her family and with nature.” The evidence provided focuses on the importance of specific words and details from the poem to build an interpretation. The essay contends that the speaker’s use of words such as “latticed” and “interlocking” and phrases such as “aligned like a lacework” and “twisted vines of genetic maps” are “connected with each other as they they create the tapestry of her childhood memories in so many different specs.” The evidence and commentary clearly develop the line of reasoning. Because only some of the evidence supports the line of reasoning, however, this essay scored 3 points in Row B.

Row C: Sophistication (0–1 points): 0

The response does not demonstrate sophistication of thought or develop a complex literary argument. Although the response concludes with a description of McElroy’s writing technique as “creat[ing] a map for the speaker to navigate the memories of her hometown,” this idea is not sustained throughout the essay. This response did not earn the sophistication point in Row C.

Sample: 1C**Score: 1-1-0****Row A: Thesis (0–1 points): 1**

The response offers a defensible interpretation of “Monologue for Saint Louis.” The thesis, “In Colleen McElroy’s poem, Monologue for Saint Louis, she uses incorrect syntax and immagdry to show how despite being back home, she feels estrange from it,” appears in paragraph 1 and earned 1 point in Row A.

Question 1 (continued)**Row B: Evidence and Commentary (0–4 points): 1**

The response provides evidence that is mostly general and tends to focus on summary or description of the poem; for example, in the first paragraph the response notes, “The poem lacks periodics, it’s a long run-on sentence,” but it does not provide any specific examples of where this is significant in the poem. The response comments that “McElroy leave out the use of periodics to show how the speaker is trying to hang on to her connection toward her home even through words. The lack of periodics is comparable to a child wishing for summer to last forever,” but it does not explain how this syntactical technique accomplishes this effect. In the third paragraph, the response provides as evidence “The arbor is now invested with worms due to her absence,” but it does not offer commentary to explain how this information supports an interpretation of the poem. Instead, the response summarizes the poem by stating, “From the first summers she lived at her old home, she and her friends whispered of older women, which she has now turned into.” Because the essay provides evidence that is general and summarizes the evidence rather than explaining how the evidence supports the thesis, this response earned 1 point in Row B.

Row C: Sophistication (0–1 points): 0

The response does not demonstrate sophistication of thought or develop a complex literary argument, and therefore it did not earn the sophistication point in Row C.