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# AP<sup>®</sup> English Literature and Composition

## Sample Student Responses and Scoring Commentary Set 2

### **Inside:**

#### **Free-Response Question 3**

- ☒ **Scoring Guidelines**
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### Question 3: Literary Argument

6 points

Many works of literature feature a character who holds a secret that can have broader implications for that character or other characters. For example, such secrets may create conflict, provide a source of consolation, protect characters from reality, or allow one character to manipulate other characters.

Either from your own reading or from the list below, choose a work of fiction in which an important character holds a secret that affects that character's relationship with one or more other characters. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how the effect of the character's secret contributes to an interpretation of the work as a whole. Do not merely summarize the plot.

In your response, you should do the following:

- Respond to the prompt with a thesis that presents a defensible interpretation.
- Provide 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	
<b>Row A</b> <b>Thesis</b> <b>(0–1 points)</b>	<b>0 points</b> For any of the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There is no defensible thesis.</li> <li>The intended thesis only restates the prompt.</li> <li>The intended thesis provides a summary of the issue with no apparent or coherent claim.</li> <li>There is a thesis, but it does not respond to the prompt.</li> </ul>	<b>1 point</b> Responds to the prompt with a thesis that presents a defensible interpretation of the selected work.
	<b>Decision Rules and Scoring Notes</b>	
	<b>Responses that do not earn this point:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Only restate the prompt.</li> <li>Make a generalized comment about the selected work that doesn't respond to the prompt.</li> </ul> <b>Examples that do not earn this point:</b> <b>Restate the prompt</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>"Secrets can have broad implications for the characters in a novel."</i></li> </ul> <b>Do not respond to the prompt but make a generalized comment about the selected work</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>"No one knows where Heathcliff's wealth comes from in Emily Bronte's <u>Wuthering Heights</u>."</i></li> <li><i>"<u>Passing</u> is a story about two women who have taken very different paths in their lives."</i></li> <li><i>"It is difficult to tell exactly what has happened in <u>The Good Soldier</u> because the narrator is unreliable."</i></li> </ul>	<b>Responses that earn this point:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide a defensible interpretation of the effect of the character's secret.</li> </ul> OR <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Make a claim about how the effect of the character's secret contributes to an interpretation of the work as a whole.</li> </ul> <b>Examples that earn this point:</b> <b>Provide a defensible interpretation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>"In <u>Hamlet</u>, Claudius's secret that he has killed his brother, the king, is what motivates and drives Hamlet to try to get revenge."</i></li> <li><i>"Because Winnie has kept so much of her past a secret in Amy Tan's <u>The Kitchen God's Wife</u>, Pearl feels distant from her mother, and in fact keeps her own secrets from her even though she loves her."</i></li> <li><i>"Sethe's secret is central to the themes of <u>Beloved</u>. She must confront the trauma she has experienced and struggle to acknowledge it before she can be released from the past."</i></li> </ul>
	<b>Additional Notes:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The thesis may be more than one sentence, provided the sentences are in close proximity.</li> <li>The thesis may be anywhere within the response.</li> <li>A thesis that offers a defensible claim about the effect of the character's secret in the selected work may earn the point; any reasonable student interpretation of "the effect of the character's secret" is acceptable.</li> <li>For a thesis to be defensible, the selected work 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.</li> <li>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.</li> <li>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.</li> </ul>	

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

Reporting Category	Scoring Criteria	
<b>Row C</b> <b>Sophistication</b> <b>(0–1 points)</b>	<b>0 points</b> Does not meet the criteria for one point.	<b>1 point</b> Demonstrates sophistication of thought and/or develops a complex literary argument.
	Decision Rules and Scoring Notes	
	<b>Responses that do not earn this point:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>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>”).</li> <li>Only hint at or suggest other possible interpretations (“<i>While another reader may see ...</i>” OR “<i>Though the text could be said to ...</i>”).</li> <li>Oversimplify complexities of the topic and/or the selected work.</li> <li>Use complicated or complex sentences or language that is ineffective because it does not enhance the student’s argument.</li> </ul>	<b>Responses that earn this point may demonstrate a sophistication of thought or develop a complex literary argument by doing any of the following:</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identifying and exploring complexities or tensions within the selected work.</li> <li>Illuminating the student’s interpretation by situating it within a broader context.</li> <li>Accounting for alternative interpretations of the text.</li> <li>Employing a style that is consistently vivid and persuasive.</li> </ol>
<b>Additional Note:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>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.</li> </ul>		

In the novel *Beloved* the author Toni Morrison writes about an African American family that is living in Cincinnati, Ohio who have faced many challenges. In the story, the main character Sethe is the mother of four children, two of which ran away, one who is dead, and one who still lives with her. The story centres around the family and many conflicts and strange things happening around the family. The book also gives a deep insight into generational trauma and how slavery impacts the generations which come after the parents who experienced it. In *Beloved* many of the conflicts that are experienced by the main characters come from the withholding information.

The most important and central instance of keeping a secret is what Sethe did to her children. After escaping her masters on her plantation, Sethe finds a new home to live in with her four children, but her location is eventually found out by her old master Schoolteacher. When this happens and Sethe realizes what is happening, she flees to the cold house behind her house and tries to kill all of her children. This is a very deep and dark secret that Sethe chooses to not tell her love interest Paul D. to try and not deter him from her. Eventually though, Sethe's secret is revealed to Paul D. by another main character Stamp Paid who was there to witness the events firsthand. This news is extremely troubling to Paul D and he can't believe she would do that saying, "That's not her mouth. That's not Sethe." (Morrison) However, Paul D. is convinced by Stamp Paid and so he decides that he needs to speak with Sethe about what she did. They get into a major argument over the topic with Paul D. reprimanding Sethe for her choice of actions. And saying that her love is too thick, leading to one of the most famous lines in the book "Love is or it ain't. Thin love ain't love at all" (Morrison) This powerful line emphasizes that Sethe stands by her actions, and truly does believe that murdering her children was better than letting them have to experience what she did. This interaction is a prime example of the impact of keeping secrets from people and how they can affect one's relationships. As up until this point Paul D. loved Sethe as shown from his reaction to being told by Stamp Paid and his disbelief that she could/would do something like that.

A second extremely pivotal secret that is kept in *Beloved* is by Paul D. himself, and the way that he chooses to approach his trauma. Paul D. also has some grave secrets of things that he has experienced in the past as he came from the same plantation as Sethe, but he also has extreme trauma from his experience in prison. Through these past events he either witnessed or experienced himself, sexual assault, murder, being a part of a chain gang, and the death of his closest friends. And his way of approaching these past events is through compartmentalisation and trying to forget his past. This is shown through a major symbol in the book, a tobacco tin where he buried his belongings to forget the past, "He wanted to say more, but knew if he did they would only be pushed further apart. So he put those words where they should go; that old tobacco tin replacing where a red heart once was, the lid rusted shut." (Morrison) These lines come directly after his fight with Sethe and show the way he deals with his emotions the clearest. He, like the actual tobacco tin that he buried, chooses to bury his own experiences rather than trying to reconcile with them. This leads to Paul D. later on in the novel having severe issues when he is seemingly forced to confront these traumas, having his tobacco tin burst open. For Paul D. his secrets and keeping them to himself leads to further harm down the line where he leaves Sethe to sleep in the cellar of a church and drink alcohol all day to cope.

The most impactful information that is kept from Sethe's family is the information that could have prevented the incident of Sethe killing her children. The community is as they are called suggests, is the community that is nearby to 124 (the house Sethe's family lives in) and they used to have a good relationship with Sethe and Sethe's mother in law Baby Suggs. However, after one night Baby Suggs holds a celebration at her place, the people of the community become jealous, "They became jealous of abundance." (Morrison) This quote shows that despite the fact that Baby Suggs was giving them food and drinks and other nice things, that the community became jealous of her having so much to give. This jealousy leads to great tragedy, as because of this jealousy, no one from the community shares some extremely vital information from Sethe's family. Which was that they knew Schoolteacher (Sethe's former master) was going to come to 124 to try and take Sethe's children away from her. The community not telling Sethe or Baby Suggs this information of course leads to them not being able to prepare for it and making Sethe attempt to murder all her children and herself. This secret not being shared to their family is essentially the reason for all of the events that take place in the novel happening, and due to this it shows the impact secrets and information can have.

The book *Beloved* covers the parts of history that are ugly and that many do not want to face or discuss. With many vivid images of the brutality of Slavery and the effects that it has on the generations that come after those who experienced it, it is a very powerful and important. Secrets and information are essential to the core of this story as the secrets kept in the story lead to the end of relationships, destroying families, and making people depressed. In conclusion, *Beloved* is a story that cannot be told and could not have happened without secrets, and the consequences of withholding them and telling them can be disastrous on people's lives.

In the play, "Fences" by August Wilson, Troy Maxson lives an unsatisfied life at home with his family and decides to live a double life with another woman in secret, yet faces the consequences of leaving his family for an affair. Troy's affair with another woman while supporting and living with his family becomes the downfall of Troy's relationship with them, showcasing that family is permanent and should always come first.

Troy lives a normal life with his wife, Rose, and son, Cory, but is unsatisfied as he is often not happy. To cope with his unhappiness, Troy would often leave the house and supposedly go to the bar to drink but instead he goes to have an affair with Alberta. Troy's affair would be noticed by his best friend, Bono, who gives him advice that family is very important and his actions are not justified as Rose values Troy and their relationship so much. Consequently, Troy's affair shows that he values his happiness rather than his family which is what causes family relationships to crumble. His constant living of two lives conflicts Troy's decision of whether to choose his enjoyment or family, having difficulty managing both. Although his wife Rose has been supporting him for many years, Troy decides that he values his mental state of being satisfied. Some may think Troy's idea can be seen as Troy just trying to live a happier life but rather is being selfish and bad father figure.

In addition, Troy decides to expose his affair with Alberta given the fact that he got her pregnant, causing the destruction of his family. When Troy exposes his affair, Rose and Cory starts to become distant with Troy as he basically abandoned his family. After the delivery of the baby, Alberta dies from child birth which leaves Troy with a baby to take care of, with no mother, and a destroyed family who shows disgust towards him. As a result, Troy's affair caused more consequences in the end than there was reward. Although, Troy was left with a baby to take care of, Rose decides that the baby did not deserve a life without a mother and that the burden of a father shouldn't lie on their children. This action explains that Rose would still care for Troy's baby showing that family does not leave each other but rather always help them out. People may think that Rose forgives Troy for his actions, instead she believes that family should not be left alone, contradicting Troy's actions of leaving his family constantly for another woman.



The short story *The Awakening* is centered around and driven by the secret desire of its main character, Edna Pontellier. Her internal wish to become independent from her husband Leonce and escape her sheltered life creates a sense of detachment from the other characters in the story, and the idea that she kept her wish a secret from those she wished away gave the story an air of detachment throughout, as if the secret she kept was the driving force of all the conflict she experienced, and if she'd told her family what she wanted, her story may have ended differently.

Throughout the story, Edna knew that her wish was to be kept a secret because of how socially unacceptable it was, and her shared knowledge of the secret with the reader informed hers and the reader's judgement of her interactions with her husband and children, interactions that were otherwise considered non-motherly at the time, or socially against the norm. Edna and the reader have knowledge about her motivations that no other character in the story has, and because of this knowledge, Edna is viewed as a caged bird waiting to be freed rather than an immoral woman whose attitude toward her duties as a wife and mother go against societal norms.

Edna's thoughts and actions push her further and further from other characters as the story develops, and the story leaves room for interpretation about how the story could have been different had Edna simply voiced her concern about her role as a wife and a mother. Rather than a tragic tale of an independent woman trapped in the life of a traditional woman, what if the story was one of triumph over societal fetters and Edna's ability to break free from her role as a housewife because she was able to speak out? The story suddenly becomes much different, leaving behind the naturalist theme and turning Edna from a character the reader pities into one he or she idolizes, all because she refused to keep a secret and bottle up her troubles.

### Question 3

**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: 3A

**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 Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. The thesis appears in the final two sentences of paragraph 1 and states, “The book also gives a deep insight into generational trauma and how slavery impacts the generations which come after the parents who experienced it. In *Beloved* many of the conflicts that are experienced by the main characters come from the withholding information.” It earned 1 point in Row A.

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

The response provides specific and relevant evidence in support of its line of reasoning that focuses on the conflicts and suffering caused by the withholding of information. In paragraph 2, the evidence, “‘That’s not her mouth. That’s not Sethe’” supports the claim, “This news is extremely troubling to Paul D and he can’t believe she would do that.” Additionally, the significance of the line, “‘Love is or it ain’t. Thin love ain’t love at all’” is explained via the commentary, “This powerful line emphasizes that Sethe stands by her actions, and truly does believe that murdering her children was better than letting them have to experience what she did.”

Paragraph 3 focuses on a secret that Paul D keeps. The evidence provides specific examples of Paul D’s trauma: “Through these past events he either witnessed or experienced himself, sexual assault, murder, being a part of a chain gang, and the death of his closest friends.” The commentary that follows suggests that “his way of approaching these past events is through compartmentalisation and trying to forget his past.”

Paragraph 4 furthers the line of reasoning by presenting the secret information that is kept from Sethe’s family. The evidence offered, “after one night Baby Suggs holds a celebration at her place, the people of the community become jealous, ‘They became jealous of abundance,’” establishes the setting for the conflict. The commentary that follows explains its significance: “This quote shows that despite the fact that Baby Suggs was giving them food and drinks and other nice things, that the community became jealous of her having so much to give. This jealousy leads to great tragedy.”

This essay provides specific, relevant evidence blended with compelling commentary to support its line of reasoning. The essay earned 4 points in Row B.

#### Row C: Sophistication (0–1 points): 1

The response demonstrates sophistication of thought through its identification and exploration of complexities and tensions found in the work. For example, the response delves into the tension created between Sethe’s secret and its effect on her relationship with Paul D. The explanation of the tobacco tin metaphor (“He, like the actual tobacco tin that he buried, chooses to bury his own experiences rather than trying to reconcile with them”) in paragraph 3 contributes to the exploration of the tension felt by the characters. While this essay contains quotes from the text, the quality of analysis, not the use of direct quotations, is what demonstrates sophistication. This essay earned 1 point in Row C.

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

The essay provides a defensible interpretation of the effect of Troy Maxson's secret in the play *Fences* by August Wilson. The thesis, "Troy's affair with another women while supporting and living with his family becomes the downfall of Troy's relationship with them, showcasing that family is permanent and should always come first," appears in the introduction of the essay and earned 1 point in Row A.

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

The response provides specific, relevant evidence, such as that found in paragraph 2, which asserts, "Troy would often leave the house and supposedly go to the bar to drink but instead he goes to have an affair with Alberta." The commentary that follows this evidence, "Troy's affair shows that he values his happiness rather than his family which is what causes family relationships to crumble" relates the thesis to the claim and helps to develop a line of reasoning. The line of reasoning focuses on the revelation that Troy's secret affair is the downfall of his relationship with his family. Paragraph 3 explores the destruction of Troy's life with Rose and Cory and offers the evidence, "When Troy exposes his affair, Rose and Cory starts to become distant with Troy as he basically abanoned his family." The commentary connects this evidence to the argument about the breakdown of the family: "As a result, Troy's affair caused more consequences in the end then there was reward."

Not all claims, however, are adequately supported by commentary. For example, the contention that "family does not leave each other but rather always help them out" (paragraph 3) is not fully integrated into the line of reasoning. The essay earned 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 evidence of Rose agreeing to care for Troy's baby hints at a layer of complexity by contrasting Rose's and Troy's approaches to family, this element is not fully explored or integrated into the argument. The response did not earn the point in Row C.

**Question 3 (continued)****Sample: 3C****Score: 1-2-0****Row A: Thesis (0–1 points): 1**

The essay makes a claim about how the effect of Edna Pontellier’s secret as described in *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin contributes to an interpretation of the work as a whole. The thesis appears in paragraph 1 and presents the idea that Edna’s “internal wish to become independent from her husband Leonce and escape her sheltered life creates a sense of detachment from the other characters in the story.” The essay earned 1 point in Row A.

**Row B: Evidence and Commentary (0–4 points): 2**

The response provides some specific evidence; for example, in paragraph 2, the essay mentions, “Edna knew that her wish was to be kept a secret because of how socially unacceptable it was.” Later in the same paragraph, the response also contends that “Edna is viewed as a caged bird waiting to be freed rather than an immoral woman whose attitude toward her duties as a wife and mother go against societal norms.” Paragraph 3 focuses on Edna’s estrangement from others but offers broad generalities, such as “the story could have been different had Edna simply voiced her concern about her role as a wife and a mother.” This supposition, however, does not support any claim. No line of reasoning is established in the essay, and the commentary about “an air of detachment” (paragraph 1) is repetitive. This commentary does not strengthen the argument. The last sentence contends that the story leaves behind “the naturalist theme” (paragraph 3), but that point is neither expounded upon nor clarified. The essay earned 2 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; therefore, it did not earn the point in Row C.