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Table of Contents

Special Focus: The Importance of Tone

Important Note: The following set of materials is organized around a particular theme, or "special focus," that reflects important topics in the AP English Literature and Composition course. The materials are intended to provide teachers with resources and classroom ideas relating to these topics. The special focus, as well as the specific content of the materials, cannot and should not be taken as an indication that a particular topic will appear on the AP Exam.

Introduction

Carol Jago
Santa Monica High School
Santa Monica, California

Helping students tune their ears to a page of text is one of the most difficult tasks AP English Literature and Composition teachers face. In the past when only the most gifted readers in a senior class enrolled in the course, you simply had to explain to students how tone was the author's implied attitude toward the subject and audience, offer a few examples, and your work was done. Now that many more than those rare few who spring whole from Zeus's head take the class—30 percent of the twelfth graders at my school enroll in AP English Literature—teachers need to be increasingly explicit when teaching about tone. The content that follows is designed to help you do just that.

Readers determine tone by paying attention to the particular choices a writer makes in terms of diction, detail, syntax, and imagery. Most of the time, good readers do this instinctively. That is why we derive pleasure from wicked monologues like Dorothy Parker's "But the One on the Right." If I were to read the following passage aloud, my tone of voice would immediately convey the narrator's scathing attitude toward the dinner party and her poor partner.

> I knew it. I knew if I came to this dinner, I'd draw something like this baby on my left. They've been saving him up for me for weeks. Now, we've simply got to have him—His sister was so sweet to us in London; we can stick him next to Mrs. Parker—she talks enough for two.

My challenge is to help students hear that tone for themselves from a page of print. I do this by teaching students to pay attention to the tricks and the tools an author uses to create tone. It is vital to their understanding of the work as a whole.

In "Reading at Risk," the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) survey of literary reading in America, NEA chairman Dana Gioia asserts that advanced literacy is a specific intellectual skill and social habit. "As more Americans lose this capability, our nation becomes less informed, active, and independent-minded. These are not qualities that a free, innovative, or productive society can afford to lose." I agree. My goal as AP teacher is much larger than simply preparing students to identify tone for the May exam. I want the young people in my care to leave able to negotiate challenging literary texts—if not with ease, with comprehension—for life. To do that, they will need to sensitize themselves to the nuances of diction and sentence structure. I want students to be able

to hear the tone in Kansas preacher John Ames's letter to his son and thereby enter the fictional world of Marilynne Robinson's gorgeous, quiet new novel, *Gilead*.

> I told you last night that I might be gone sometime, and you said, Where, and I said, To be with the Good Lord, and you said, Why, and I said, Because I'm old, and you said, I don't think you're old. And you put your hand in my hand and you said, You aren't very old, as if that settled it. I told you you might have a very different life from mine, and from the life you've had with me, and that would be a wonderful thing, there are many ways to live a good life.

The contributors to this volume share my belief that this intellectual skill can be taught.

The Narrative of Moral Ambiguity in *All the King's Men*

Robin Aufses
J. F. Kennedy High School
Bellmore, New York

The study of point of view in *All the King's Men* is a good cure for the notion that the literary purpose of first-person point of view is to "get inside the head" of a character or to help the reader "feel what the character is feeling." As one of my students said, "Even though Jack is the narrator, we really don't know what he thinks. He talks about everyone else." Jack Burden, the novel's first-person narrator, provides an interesting contrast to Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Pip in *Great Expectations*, and even Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye*. Jack is more reliable than Holden; after all, he had been a reporter and a graduate student in history, and he justifies his objectivity—which borders on irresponsibility—with journalistic and academic prerogatives. *All the King's Men* is not a coming-of-age story like the ones told by Scout or Pip, though, like both characters, Jack comes to terms with his past by telling his story. The novel's world is as detailed and vivid as Pip's London, Scout's Maycomb, or Holden's New York City, and its mood and tone as distinctive. But *All the King's Men* is not just the story of Jack Burden's time in history, nor is it the story of his feelings. Jack's function, and the function of his first-person narrative, is interpretive, evocative, and thematic. Jack's story is both a political history and a story of character, and his narration reminds us that, in the end, the story of politics is always a story about character.

The questions I've posed, along with suggestions for answers, should help students see point of view as an organic literary element, one of the ways a novel's meaning develops. Jack Burden, the narrator of *All the King's Men*, asks most of the novel's questions: he answers some himself, some are answered by the novel's other characters, the reader answers others, and some remain unanswered altogether.

What is Jack's function in describing the novel's characters? What does he know? What does he miss? What does he misinterpret? How does he justify his relationships with them?

Jack filters the political and social action of the novel, always returning to the novel's central question: can the ends justify the means? Jack takes us back to 1922 to his first meeting with Willie Stark, who appears to be a country bumpkin. Jack describes Willie's handshake as "a little too moist—which is something you don't hold against a man in certain latitudes—then you discovered that it had a solid substructure" (15). Jack is

pretty sure Willie winks at him, but even years later Willie refuses to commit to having winked. Their relationship is enigmatic, much like that wink. The reader, however, begins to understand why they need each other: their idealism and their cynicism are nicely matched, though Willie is far more self-aware than Jack is.

Jack's view of morally corrupt characters like Tiny Duffy is just as dispassionate as his view of a character like Adam Stanton, who, until the novel's violent denouement, is nearly a stick figure on the moral high road. Jack is a researcher, a reporter, and a detective, always in search of the truth. By seeing the world in thrall to the "Great Twitch," which renders all human action involuntary, he avoids judging both the novel's characters and himself.

How and why do we know that Jack is emotionally crippled? How does this handicap move the narrative, develop the other characters, and create meaning? Is the reader more aware than Jack about what's going on?

Jack's visits to his mother in Burden's Landing are marked by anger and frustration. At a dinner party where conversation has turned to politics, Jack ponders the peculiar assumption made by the gentry of Burden's Landing: "[E]ven though I did work for Willie my heart was with them. I was just picking up a little, or maybe a lot, of change with Willie, but my heart was in Burden's Landing and they had no secrets from me and they knew they couldn't hurt my feelings" (125). He provokes his dinner companions by asking whether Willie would "be having to make up so many short cuts to get something done to make up for the time lost all these years in not getting something done?" (125). The assembled company is shocked, but Jack backpedals and says he was just offering a "proposition for the sake of argument" (125). Jack is so focused on his effort to maintain moral neutrality that he barely hears Judge Irwin's defense of Willie: "But there's one principle he's grasped: you don't make omelettes without breaking eggs. And precedents. He's broken plenty of eggs and he may make his omelettes. And remember the Supreme Court has backed him up on every issue he's raised to date" (124). Jack's inability, or unwillingness, to defend Willie makes him as culpable as Willie for the mistakes of his administration. And when Jack is at Willie's deathbed, and Willie tells him it could have been different, Jack has his doubts; it is the strength of the novel that the reader is not sure either. The answer to the question of whether the ends justify the means is finally a personal one.

How can point of view create tone and mood? How does the narrative create and convey a tone of moral ambiguity?

Jack's narration creates the novel's noir mood: his bitterness darkens the novel's scenery; his re-creation of the events of his past, such as his early romance with

Anne Stanton, creates pools of light that dim quickly. The investigation of Judge Irwin and its consequences are all dark twists and turns, ending in the "fox-smelling lair" inhabited by Lily Mae Littlepaugh, browbeaten by Jack into submitting evidence that Irwin had taken a bribe. For good measure he has her make a statement to a notary about Governor Stanton's knowledge of Irwin's crime. Jack, however, maintains the distance of the researcher:

> For nothing is lost, nothing is ever lost. There is always the clue, the canceled check, the smear of lipstick, the footprint in the canna bed, the condom on the dark path, the twitch in the old wound, the baby shoes dipped in bronze, the taint in the blood stream. And all times are one time, and all those dead in the past never lived before our definition gives them life, and out of the shadow their eyes implore us.
>
> And that is what all of us historical researchers believe.
>
> And we love truth. (228)

Jack's detachment from the consequences of his actions leads to one of the novel's most cinematic scenes, in a place that Jack describes as a "set for a play" (243). Anne Stanton has summoned him; they've had a drink at Slade's and are walking on a street "blank and dim, with a leaning lamppost at the end of the block, and the cobbles oily-greasy-glimmering in its rays and the houses shuttered . . . you expected to see the heroine saunter up, lean against the lamppost and light a cigarette." Instead, Jack plays the part of a very questionable hero. Surprised by the fervor with which Anne pleads with him to convince her brother Adam to take the job running the hospital that is to be the Stark administration's pure and crowning achievement, Jack suggests that Anne "change the picture of the world inside [Adam's] head" (247). But Jack is disturbed by something "like an offstage noise or something caught out of the tail of your eye or an itch that comes when your hands are full and you can't scratch" (245). Rather than figure out what's wrong, Jack bulls on, doing his job, removed from his own instincts; he tells Anne the truth about Judge Irwin and that her father—Governor Stanton himself—knew about the bribe Irwin had taken. Anne runs away from Jack, and a "beefy, black-jowled" policeman comes out of the darkness, ordering Jack to get the lady home. Jack can't resist the urge to bully the bullying cop, and he identifies himself as Governor Stark's right-hand man. The cop, understandably resentful, lets them go, and Jack apologizes to Anne for acting like a "son-of-a-bitch." Anne answers, "I can't imagine to what particular thing you are referring." She refuses to speak to Jack and will not allow him to take her home. Anne does use the information to convince Adam to take the job, but Jack doesn't figure out

until much later that Anne had known about the job offer because she had become Willie's mistress. Jack's willful detachment from the consequences of his actions is justified by both his obsessive rationalization—founded on the notion that a student of history must be objective—and his ever-dependable theory of the Great Twitch. He is so at home in the "cardboard stage set" that he's blind to the way events are spiraling out of control and also to his responsibility for their tragic conclusion.

How does Jack achieve self-knowledge? Does the reader's understanding of events precede, parallel, or follow Jack's?

The veil is finally lifted from Jack's eyes, and he achieves self-knowledge in the hardest possible way, by seeing himself as others see him. Jack's last investigation is to learn the truth about the events that led to Willie's assassination and Adam's death. Sadie Burke, knowing she couldn't compete, had told Tiny Duffy about Willie's relationship with Anne. Predictably, Tiny, finally reacting to Willie's abuse and desperate to make his own kickback deal for the hospital construction, had made the call to Adam. What is less predictable for Jack, and what opens his eyes, is a job offer from Tiny, who has become the governor. Jack asks himself why Duffy had been so sure he would work for him and finally has to face the "nightmare truth, which was that [they] were twins bound together more intimately and disastrously than the poor freaks of the midway who are bound by the common stitch of flesh . . . under the unwinking eye of Eternity and by the Holy Grace of the Great Twitch which we must all adore" (417). Forced to see the consequences of his detachment, Jack can never again ignore the responsibility of the present by hiding behind the "moral neutrality" of history.

I don't believe the reader has a head start on Jack. His narrative tone is so cynical, so comfortable in its detachment, so objective about the moral flaws of characters like Tiny, Sadie Burke, and even Willie, that one takes his distance from them for granted. *All the King's Men* does not depend on an ironic gap; rather, it depends on the reader's response to Machiavelli's assertion that the ends justify the means.

What conclusions does Jack come to? Are they the same conclusions the reader comes to?

In the novel's final chapter, as Jack finally reflects and the reader is privy to the "new picture of the world" given to him by his mother, who loved Monty Irwin and was not as cold-hearted as it had been convenient for Jack to believe, Jack forgives himself and Judge Irwin, understanding that "a man's virtue may be but the defect of his desire, as his crime

may be but a function of his virtue" (437). He admits to having told the story of Willie Stark in order to tell the story of himself, and the novel ends with Jack and his wife Anne living in the house Irwin had bequeathed him, taking care of the "Scholarly Attorney" Jack had always believed to be the father who had abandoned him, and finally writing the Cass Mastern story. He is soon to "go out of the house and go into the convulsion of the world, out of history into history and the awful Responsibility of Time" (438). Jack's journey to self-knowledge has paralleled his role as the novel's narrator: his detached reporting of the novel's events becomes, at the end, analytical, expository, and engaged. The reader may conclude, along with Jack, that history is human activity performed by flawed but often well-meaning men and women. It is hard not to conclude, along with Jack, that character is the acceptance of the burden of responsibility for the past, present, and future.

Teaching *All the King's Men*

Teaching *All the King's Men* presents challenges and offers pleasures. One way I have pulled my students in—it's a little underhanded but works effectively on their egos—is to tell them that every year I consider giving it up until I remember that my smartest students love it. My second tactic is to present it as a great political novel; in this election year I replaced my usual opening novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, with *All the King's Men*, and nearly all of my students found interesting and provocative parallels with current events. My third strategy is to consider it a detective novel, with first-person narrator Jack Burden standing in for the hard-boiled Raymond Chandler/Dashiell Hammett hero, complete with film noir mood, deeply cynical tone, and festering moral ambiguity. Of course, the novel is more than a detective story; however, Jack's investigation—finding the "dirt" on Judge Irwin and, like Oedipus, finding unexpected relationships along the way—restates and complicates the novel's political themes, as well as its themes of loyalty, social responsibility, and family. As much as we want to consider this a novel about the rise and fall of a demagogue or a roman à clef about Huey Long, it is no accident that Robert Penn Warren never identifies the state in which it takes place as Louisiana. The novel is the story of Jack Burden, his shedding of and reshouldering the burden of social responsibility. Jack's story of his relationship with Willie and his questionable part in Willie's rise and fall is the story of how Jack's own character develops. And that may be the reason his narration lacks self-awareness except in retrospect. Do we ever know, as it's happening, that we're developing character?

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Special Focus: The Importance of Tone

Hearing the Tone in Jhumpa Lahiri's "Interpreter of Maladies"

Ellen Greenblatt
University High School
Fresno, California

Most students can identify the *subject* of Jhumpa Lahiri's story, "Interpreter of Maladies." It is about a man in India who, while acting as a driver and guide for a visiting Indian-American family, learns something, maybe about the world, maybe about himself. But its *tone* is another matter entirely. From Lahiri's intriguingly ambiguous title (*What* maladies? How does anyone *interpret* maladies?) to the story's ending image of a slip of paper fluttering away in the wind, the tone only subtly and gradually reveals itself.

Mr. Kapasi, the title character of "Interpreter of Maladies," must listen carefully as patients explain their discomforts. He's got to get the words just right as he translates for the doctor who does not understand Gujarati, the language in which his patients are describing their "symptoms of so many swollen bones, countless cramps of bellies and bowels, spots of people's palms that changed color, shape, or size." But, though Mr. Kapasi is proud that he gets the words just right for his Indian employer, he is less successful in understanding and speaking with the Americans for whom he is acting as a tour guide. He finds himself over his head when Mrs. Das, an American of Indian background, privately, almost casually, confesses her infidelity to him. The hopeless fantasies of the thwarted, unhappy interpreter of others' maladies speak so loudly in his mind that he cannot hear—really hear—what Mrs. Das is saying. Trapped in a life and role from which he will never escape, he succumbs to a longing that deafens him.

But Lahiri allows *us* to hear as she creates the overlapping, interweaving tones in the story. We can easily see that the story is *about* a man who imagines he is entering into an intimate relationship, one that readers know from the start is impossible. The dramatic irony—the discrepancy between what the *characters* and the *readers* know—is clear. But what is Lahiri's *attitude* toward Mr. Kapasi and the Das family? And how does she convey it?

Tone, the attitude toward a subject conveyed in a literary work, results from a variety of stylistic devices. In Lahiri's as well as others' work, some of the most obvious of those

devices are diction and detail. Lahiri's unwavering eye invites, then fends off, pity for Mr. Kapasi through the details she includes and the words she chooses. For example, Mr. Kapasi is careful, even vain about what he is wearing: "gray trousers and a matching jacket-style shirt, tapered at the waist, with short sleeves and a large pointed collar, made of a thin but durable material. He had specified both the cut and the fabric to his tailor." Yet the inclusion of "large pointed collar" and "thin but durable material" introduces his difference from Mr. Das, a "magnified version" of his young son, "dressed in shorts, sneakers, and a T-shirt." Mr. Kapasi notes all the details of the Das family, a group that "looked Indian but dressed as foreigners did, the children in stiff, brightly colored clothing and caps with translucent visors," Mrs. Das in "a red-and-white checkered skirt that stopped above her knees . . . and a close-fitting blouse styled like a man's undershirt." From the start, the way Lahiri presents Mr. Kapasi's close observations allows us to feel the inchoate blend of longing, disapproval, and insecurity he feels both about how he looks and where he belongs.

When the Das family and Mr. Kapasi stop just before they reach the temple at Konarak, Mr. Kapasi can "smell a scent on [Mrs. Das's] skin, like a mixture of whiskey and rosewater. He worried suddenly that she could smell his perspiration, which he knew had collected beneath the synthetic material of his shirt." At the same moment, he realizes that a bit of mango juice had "dripped onto his chin. He wondered if Mrs. Das had noticed." Once again, the details and diction convey tone. Of course, we cringe because we know that Mrs. Das notices the "smell," the "perspiration," the "drip" on his chin. But we also know that she does not see Mr. Kapasi as a fully realized human being, even as we have access to his past hopes and dreams of being a translator and his present fantasy that Mrs. Das's request for his address fuels. So the dramatic irony—the distance between what we and Mr. Kapasi know—augments the growing tone of sadness and emptiness.

When, before the story begins, Mr. Kapasi's son dies, his life changes sadly and irrevocably, and though he accepts his fate, he continues to harbor various hopes. Mrs. Das's interest in him, "an interest she did not express in either her husband or her children, [is] mildly intoxicating." The fact that Mrs. Das does not really see him, much less find him "intoxicating," builds the tone of sadness and futility with which the story ends as the "slip of paper with Mr. Kapasi's address on it fluttered away in the wind." How fragile is the "slip" of his hopes! How sad that no one but Mr. Kapasi notices as his hopes "fluttered away."

Special Focus: The Importance of Tone

Some questions to encourage students to focus on tone:

1. What are the various connotations of maladies in the story? Who is sick? From what are they suffering? How are the maladies presented? Look for specific details as you think about the tone of the descriptions.
2. What role do the children play in the story? What details most reveal them? Are they meant to represent innocence? What is the difference between Mr. Kapasi's and the Das parents' attitude toward the children?
3. How is the monkey scene presented? What role does each character play in that scene? What is the tone surrounding the scene?
4. Look at the scene where Mr. Kapasi is figuring out how many days and weeks it will take for him to receive a letter from Mrs. Das. What details convey the tone of the scene? How does dramatic irony affect tone here?

The Writer Embedded in the Story: A Conversation with Jhumpa Lahiri

Renee H. Shea
Bowie State University
Bowie, Maryland

Introduction

In 2000, Jhumpa Lahiri won the Pulitzer Prize for *Interpreter of Maladies*, a collection of short stories. Not only was she at age 32 the youngest winner of this prestigious prize, but she captured it with her first book. *Interpreter of Maladies* went on to commercial success as well as literary acclaim, including the PEN/Hemingway and the New Yorker Debut of the Year awards. Her novel *The Namesake* (2003) has enjoyed similar success and is currently being made into a film. In a review of *The Namesake* in the *New York Times*, Michiko Kakutani praised Lahiri for taking "the haunting chamber music of her first collection of stories and reorchestrat[ing] its themes of exile and identity to create a symphonic work, a debut novel that is as assured and eloquent as the work of a longtime master of the craft." This interview was conducted in January 2005.

Born in London, Lahiri immigrated with her Bengali parents to Boston and then Kingston, Rhode Island. She received her B.A. in English from Barnard College and earned three M.A. degrees and a doctorate in Renaissance studies from Boston University. She lives in Brooklyn with her husband Alberto Vourvoulias and their two children. Although she is currently on a self-described "maternity leave" after the birth of her daughter Noor in November 2004, she says she is working on another short story collection.

Renee Shea: As a teacher, I can't resist asking why three master's degrees and a Ph.D.? You must have loved being a student!

Jhumpa Lahiri: I loved reading. I was an English major in college and felt when I graduated that I had so far to go just as a reader to absorb so much about literature—and I still feel that way. I started in a literature program, but in the process of studying academically, I became more serious about my own writing. Remaining in an academic setting and schedule was a way for me to continue writing and not have to go out there in the world.

Special Focus: The Importance of Tone

RS: What was the subject of your dissertation?

JL: I did a cross-disciplinary study focusing on architectural history and literature: "Accursed Palace: The Italian Palazzo on the Jacobean Stage (1603–1625)." I looked at a number of plays by English playwrights and the image of the Italian palace as a corrupt setting.

RS: I can see your study of architecture contributing to the strong visual elements in your writing as well as the vivid sense of place. Today, though, I'd like to ask you some questions about tone in your work. What does tone mean to you in a general sense?

JL: I think of it as a mood—in terms of music. It's hard to put into words when applied to literature, but I have an instinctive feeling for what it is. In short stories, the tone has to be more or less consistent, but in a novel it can vary, and go in and out with darker and lighter tones. That's what I think about in a general sense, but I don't think about it consciously when I'm writing—except when I first start something. Then, I'm aware of the tone, but that's intuitive.

RS: Could you explain the analogy of tone in music?

JL: Comparing tone to an aspect of music really has to do with key—the way a certain key organizes and dictates the range of notes in a piece of music and, more generally, sets the mood. The definition of a key in music is, after all, a tonal system. I learned to play classical music when I was younger and was always aware of tone in the musical sense. Perhaps that's why tone is something I'm so conscious of in my writing. In music as in writing, tone represents the pitch or character of a piece. The difference is that in music tone corresponds to a specific set of strictures; in language, the concept is more abstract.

RS: As a student, how did you learn about tone?

JL: It came up more in high school and less so as I advanced in my study. It was a tool that was used to help understand a piece of writing. It seemed to me like one of the more amorphous elements of a story. It's easier to analyze plot, setting, character—the more grounded elements—while tone and theme hover around those.

RS: In a recent piece in the New York Times Book Review, you cited the Irish writer William Trevor as a major influence on you and your work. I think of his stories having such an elegiac tone, and I wonder if the wistful, circumspect tone of many of the stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* comes from this influence.

JL: I think so. He's influenced me in many, many ways but partly as a matter of tone. Just reading the opening lines of his stories—they're remarkable, very distinctive. He has his own tone, but it's not something one can imitate.

RS: Would you say that tone is what allows us to identify or recognize a specific writer?

JL: It's a matter of voice. That's something that gets talked about more in writing classes than literature. Tone and voice bleed into each other—the writer is embedded in the story somehow.

RS: Perhaps as teachers, then, we should talk more about voice in our classes as a way to approach tone?

JL: Maybe. I think voice is one of those things that confuse people, especially aspiring writers. When you're told, "You need to find your voice," you think, "Well, where is it? Where can I find it?" It comes from writing a lot. You develop a certain sensibility and it's distinctive. It surprised me that, as I wrote more and more over the years, people would read something and say, "I really liked this: it was different but it was definitely you." I realized that there was something running through everything I'm writing—it's that sense of the writer embedded in the work.

RS: It sounds as though you are saying that you really understood tone and voice once you began to write yourself. So do you think that engaging students in their own creative writing is the best way to help them understand?

JL: Starting to write myself opened up the way I read literature radically, but I don't think one necessarily has to make something in order to understand how to read it or look at it. I've taken art history courses where I've been taught how to appreciate painting, but I haven't made a painting myself—apart from what I did when I was five. In a way, they're such separate activities, reading and writing, even though they're inextricably linked in my life. They use different parts of your brain.

Special Focus: The Importance of Tone

RS: One of the prevalent themes in your work is the "divided identity" that you have described yourself as having experienced. I'm wondering if that division or dislocation leads to an ironic tone. In "Interpreter of Maladies," for instance, the description of the temple at Konarak could be read straightforwardly, but we experience it as irony because of the dislocation of Mr. and Mrs. Das, who are Indian, having to have their own history explained to them by a tour guide.

JL: None of these elements we have to understand a piece of writing exists by itself; they're all different organs, and without them working together, the story can't function. In this example, the characters' backgrounds alter the meaning of what's being explained, so there is something beyond the obvious as a result.

RS: You've described the short story, in contrast to the novel, in terms such as "purity and intensity," saying that the short story has "a ruthless distilled quality." Can you explain what you mean?

JL: I'm picking up on what I've learned and read, what many writers have said, and also how I feel now that I've tried writing in both forms. I think that the short story has a compression and concentration that is akin to poetry; maybe it's a middle ground between poetry and the novel. Although there's not a length prescription—some of my favorite writers write very long, leisurely stories—but there's still something the story has to do in the first paragraph that a novel does not. It's a matter of a certain hook; if the story doesn't start to open up and unwind from the very beginning, it's not very successful. That's where the demand comes from.

RS: Are you an intense reviser?

JL: I think every writer is. I can't imagine not going over something I've written hundreds of times.

RS: I'm curious about something: Is the main character in your wonderful story "The Third and Final Continent" the beginning of Gogol in *The Namesake*? He reveals so little of his interior life, yet he's so compelling.

JL: He is a character who's a very private sort of person who will only reveal some parts of his life—in a kind of tidy way. But there was no connection between him and Gogol. In a broad sense, *The Namesake* is the story of the son of that character—at least that's the world of the novel.

RS: Are you writing the screenplay for the film of *Namesake* that Mira Nair is directing?

JL: No.

RS: Then, don't you worry? It seems to me that the easy part of turning a book into a film is the characters and plot, even setting, yet tone is the essential element that often gets lost in the "translation" from written text to visual performance.

JL: I think tone is the most vulnerable, especially in matters of transposition. But really, the story, the characters, setting, and plot are in the hands of another person—the director—and suddenly it's the director embedded in the work, not the writer. I think that's why it's not possible to capture the tone of a book. How one experiences tone in writing versus a film is very different. What's important is for the film to have a distinctive tone and one that works, but not necessarily the tone of the book. I don't expect Mira to bring to her film rendition exactly my sensibility because she's a completely different person, yet she's responded to the world of the book and characters to the point where she wants to bring them to life in her own way.

RS: What do you mean when you say that we experience tone differently in fiction and in film?

JL: It's a consequence of different forms. In a book we experience language in one way, but film is in many ways the opposite. We experience a book in silence, there's no visual at all, so much is dependent upon our ability to envision things. We experience the book over time, we can go back. A film has sound, a continuous experience of a couple of hours with no going back (unless you're watching a video). You're almost using different muscles.

RS: I'd like to talk about what you think makes good teaching, though, first, I wanted to ask if you're familiar with the Advanced Placement English Literature Exam?

JL: Yes, I took it in high school. I didn't do very well on the exam—but I loved the class!

RS: Why? What can we as teachers do to instill a love of reading in our students?

Special Focus: The Importance of Tone

JL: I think there is only so much a teacher can do. Some people are simply more interested in the experience of reading—that is, sitting quietly and engaging with an imagined world created out of words—than others. It's a matter of personality. I was shy as a child and physically timid. Reading felt safe and, in many ways, more rewarding than interacting with peers or running across the playground. For those less inclined to reading, a teacher's job is more difficult.

RS: You must have had some teachers more memorable than others, though. What do you think makes a really fine teacher?

JL: What I've always responded to was passion for the work, reverence for the work, feeling that literature had value and importance in the world, that it's as inspirational and essential as I believe it is. That's what I felt about the best of my teachers.

RS: What would you like for high school students who are reading your work to take away from that experience?

JL: Nothing in particular. I don't have a "big message." The stories are a way of looking at life, and I hope that readers can relate to them—and in some ways find them true and real.

Note:
A videotape of Jhumpa Lahiri reading and discussing her work is available online at www.marinerreadersguides.com.

Discovering Irony Through Inquiry: Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown"

Steven Fox
Retired teacher

Irony is so pervasive a feature of mature literature that it is hard to imagine a successful reader who does not perceive and process irony when encountering it. Whether we are speaking of verbal irony, dramatic irony, or situational irony, we are always aware that there is a discrepancy, a gap, between two elements of the material at hand—between what is said and what is meant, between what the reader knows to be true and what the character believes at the moment to be true, or between what one expects and what actually happens. Because irony is so common an ingredient in our literature, we must be sure that our students do not miss it and the contribution it makes to the experience of their reading.

A quick look at the AP English Literature Examination questions that have appeared since 1999 reveals how handicapped a candidate unresponsive to irony would have been. The prose questions since that time have included analyses of tone and characterization in excerpts from such diverse works as Cormac McCarthy's *The Crossing*, Joseph Addison's *The Spectator*, Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*, Alain de Botton's *Kiss and Tell*, Mavis Gallant's "The Other Paris," and Henry James's "The Pupil." Anyone lacking the capacity to recognize irony could give only very limited responses to the questions put forward on any of these works. The poetry questions during those years require only a slightly less firm command of irony. Certainly readers comparing the sirens in Homer's *Odyssey* to those in Margaret Atwood's "Siren Song" experience ironic insight upon discovering the latter to be quite different in many ways from the former, in spite of any preconceived expectations. When the student is asked to compare two poems, as has often been the case in the past several years (Wordsworth's "London, 1802" and Dunbar's "Douglass," Bridges's "ΕΡΩΣ" and Stevenson's "Eros," Dickinson's "We grow accustomed to the dark" and Frost's "Acquainted with the Night"), the result will often include an investigation of the poets' attitudes and techniques, and this investigation will raise opportunities to discuss the effects of irony on the poems' subjects and meanings. The open question is also typically a rich opportunity to discuss irony. Instructions for that essay have included discussions of characters whose minds are torn asunder by two competing projects, of characters who confront a mystery, of characters who display the kind of madness Emily Dickinson writes of in "Much Madness—," of characters who are morally ambiguous, of tragic characters who

function as instruments of other people's sufferings, and finally, of questions raised by novels and plays and the answers those works imply. Again, teachers should see that without a firm grasp of irony—the ability to recognize it and to see its role in the author's communication of thought—a reader will perform poorly on an exercise such as the AP English Literature and Composition Exam.

But of course we don't want our students to learn about irony so that they can do well on a test. Irony, like virtue, is its own reward. Stories, novels, poems, and plays that employ irony offer delight and wisdom, like Chaucer's solace and sentence, to the discerning reader. Our question is, then, how do we develop in our students the skill and habit of reading with an eye for irony?

In order to help students recognize irony and reconcile its discrepancies, we should encourage them to read actively and to ask questions as they move through the works of literature. Though the wording may change from one piece to another, some general questions give an idea of the kinds of investigations active readers pursue:

- How many reasonable explanations can I think of for why the character made a particular decision?
- Why did the character make that decision when another decision seemed at the moment to make more sense?
- What do I as the reader know that the character does not, and how does that difference in knowledge affect the character's behavior?
- Does the voice of the author indicate approval, criticism, amusement, frustration, or any other reaction that might be a factor in how I as the reader am allowed to perceive this material?
- Do I share the character's values, or are my assumptions different from those of this character and other characters in the story?

Irony in a Hawthorne Story

Looking at a short story that often appears in the AP English classroom will show how a student who asks these questions, or ones like them, will uncover the work's ironies and begin to apply them to an understanding of the story's meaning. Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" offers the very opportunities AP teachers often seek in choosing which works to include in their curricula. The story is a challenging but rewarding one; students who ask questions while they read are likely to encounter irony almost immediately. Here is the opening of the story and a sample student inquiry that might accompany its first reading:

> Young Goodman Brown came forth at sunset into the street at Salem Village; but put his head back after crossing the threshold, to exchange a parting kiss with his young wife. And Faith, as the wife was aptly named, thrust her own pretty head into the street, letting the wind play with the pink ribbons of her cap while she called to Goodman Brown.
>
> "Dearest heart," whispered she, softly and rather sadly, when her lips were close to his ear, "prithee put off your journey until sunrise and sleep in your own bed to-night. A lone woman is troubled with such dreams and such thoughts that she's afeard of herself sometimes. Pray tarry with me this night, dear husband, of all nights in the year."
>
> "My love and my Faith," replied young Goodman Brown, "of all nights in the year, this one night must I tarry away from thee. My journey, as thou callest it, forth and back again, must needs be done 'twixt now and sunrise. What, my sweet, pretty wife, dost thou doubt me already, and we but three months married?"
>
> "Then God bless you!" said Faith, with the pink ribbons; "and may you find all well when you come back."
>
> "Amen!" cried Goodman Brown. "Say thy prayers, dear Faith, and go to bed at dusk, and no harm will come to thee."
>
> So they parted; and the young man pursued his way until, being about to turn the corner by the meeting-house, he looked back and saw the head of Faith still peeping after him with a melancholy air, in spite of her pink ribbons.

The reader is likely to have several questions about these opening paragraphs, and some of them will reveal that there are discrepancies between what appears to be so and what must actually be so, or between what a character says and what that character actually means. Why must Goodman Brown leave his house at sunset, an unusual time to begin a journey? Even his wife believes he ought to wait until morning. Why does he tell her that his journey must be done at night? What can he be up to? And if he is the one about to embark on a suspicious enterprise (the Puritans were, after all, uncomfortable with the threat of evil lurking in the night), why does he assure her that if *she* prays, no harm will come to *her*?

Special Focus: The Importance of Tone

To ascertain that the student is beginning to think in terms of irony, a teacher might invite the class to ask all the questions raised by the opening passage (either these six paragraphs or any portion the teacher feels is workable) and conduct a discussion of what the students think they understand at this point and what issues they feel are not yet made clear. If they continue for three more paragraphs, they find that Brown considers himself a wretch to embark on such an errand, yet he has just admonished Faith for doubting him ("and we but three months married"). If she knew the reason for the journey "'twould kill her," and the narrator even refers to Brown's activity as his "present evil purpose." The imagery of these paragraphs is notably dark and gloomy; Brown himself responds to his surroundings by wondering if "the devil himself should be at my very elbow." These details would make an observant reader question Brown's behavior. Certainly they provide an ironic counterpoint against the title "Goodman," the Puritan equivalent of "Mr.," that accompanies every mention of his name.

A thinking reader will note the discrepancy between the image Brown offers to his wife (that of a solicitous husband who says that if she just goes inside and goes to bed early, everything will be all right) and the image the narrator gives of Brown (as a sinful wretch about to undertake a journey into the forbidden forest). Later in the story, when Brown is deeper in the forest, he believes he hears a babble of voices—voices that sound familiar and recognizable as some of his townspeople, both the pious and the profligate. Among the collection of sounds one voice stands out:

> There was one voice, of a young woman, uttering lamentations, yet with an uncertain sorrow, and entreating for some favor, which, perhaps, it would grieve her to obtain; and all the unseen multitude, both saints and sinners, seemed to encourage her onward.
>
> "Faith!" shouted Goodman Brown, in a voice of agony and desperation; and the echoes of the forest mocked him, crying, "Faith! Faith!" as if bewildered wretches were seeking her all through the wilderness.
>
> The cry of grief, rage, and terror was yet piercing the night, when the unhappy husband held his breath for a response. There was a scream, drowned immediately in a louder murmur of voices, fading into far-off laughter, as the dark cloud swept away, leaving the clear and silent sky above Goodman Brown. But something fluttered lightly down through the air and caught on the branch of a tree. The young man seized it, and beheld a pink ribbon.

> "My Faith is gone!" cried he, after one stupefied moment. "There is no good on earth; and sin is but a name. Come, devil; for to thee is this world given."

The successful reader will make note of the ambiguity in Hawthorne's language. To what Faith does Brown call? Is it his wife's name, because he recognizes her voice in the cacophony, or is he calling upon his own moral strength to avert the temptation this moment exerts on him? If the former, what is Brown's wife doing in the middle of the forest, and how did she get there? If the latter, isn't it hypocritical, or even futile, for Brown to call upon the very quality he abandoned at his doorway when the story opened (and not coincidentally, the quality for which his wife is named)? And in either case, how do we explain the appearance of the pink ribbon, which earlier signified the vision of Brown's wife as he set off for the forest?

The story continues to present situations and descriptions that require the reader to bridge gaps between what appears to be so and what else might be so. Did Brown actually see the devil's initiation in the forest? Were all the good townspeople—the minister, Deacon Gookin, old Goody Cloyse—really involved in bringing young converts to worship evil? Was Faith about to be taken by Satan and rescued (if she indeed was rescued) from her damnation by Brown's last-minute entreaty?

And what difference did it all make?

Had Goodman Brown fallen asleep in the forest and only dreamed a wild dream of a witch-meeting?

> Be it so if you will; but, alas! it was a dream of evil omen for young Goodman Brown. A stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful, if not a desperate man did he become from the night of that fearful dream. On the Sabbath day, when the congregation were singing a holy psalm, he could not listen because an anthem of sin rushed loudly upon his ear and drowned all the blessed strain. When the minister spoke from the pulpit with power and fervid eloquence, and, with his hand on the open Bible, of the sacred truths of our religion, and of saint-like lives and triumphant deaths, and of future bliss or misery unutterable, then did Goodman Brown turn pale, dreading lest the roof should thunder down upon the gray blasphemer and his hearers. Often, awaking suddenly at midnight, he shrank from the bosom of Faith; and at morning or eventide, when the

> family knelt down at prayer, he scowled and muttered to himself, and gazed sternly at his wife, and turned away. And when he had lived long, and was borne to his grave a hoary corpse, followed by Faith, an aged woman, and children and grandchildren, a goodly procession, besides neighbors not a few, they carved no hopeful verse upon his tombstone, for his dying hour was gloom.

Even at the end of the story the reader asks questions. The more literal-minded will always wonder whether Brown actually experienced the devil worshipping ceremony in the forest. The reader more attuned to irony will focus on the night's effect and wonder perhaps what made Brown embark on such a journey in the first place, and ask what the author invites us to think about by showing us the story of a man who had Faith but who had no faith, of a Goodman who struggled with being a good man, of one who sought to explore the discrepancies between what he was supposed to believe is true and what he suspected and feared actually was true, and who was destroyed by the very irony that he found.

The reader who takes everything at face value and fails to consider the ironic possibilities of the story comes away with a much less satisfying experience than the one who asks the questions that lead to an awareness of the story's ironies. Each teacher needs to find the best material for teaching his or her students the skill of active and inquiring reading, using questions like the ones suggested above, and then offer enough opportunities for the students to practice and master that skill; but once they have and employ it, their reading experiences will be so much the richer for it.

The Teacher as the Guide on the Side: Understanding Tone in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

Elfie Israel
Retired teacher

What Is It All About?

"In order to make omelets you have to break a few eggs." The tone of this sentence is:

(A) Sarcastic
(B) Objective
(C) Pedantic
(D) Satirical

"Not fair!" protests one of my students. "Don't we have to know who is talking and why?"

"Absolutely!" I respond.

If a mother is speaking to her married daughter, the answer could be (a). If a chef, possibly (b). Perhaps Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice*? Then (c) and possibly (d). If the quotation refers to the Commander in *The Handmaid's Tale*, it is (d). Determining the tone in a work of literature is difficult. The quandary teachers face is how to help students find and recognize a literary work's tone(s) and understand how this helps to illuminate its underlying meaning. The key is for students to unearth these themselves, guided by the teacher. The following strategies have worked with *The Handmaid's Tale* and can be adapted for many other literary pieces.

A Rose by Any Other Name: Discovering Tone via Seminar

Upon entering my room, students are handed colored Post-it notes. The males receive ones with words such as Commander, eyes, priest, guardian. What about the girls? Some are Martha. Some Jezebel. A few are aunts. The remaining females need to write either their father's or boyfriend's name on the card and then affix an "of" before that name. These will be their names in class for the week. Stephanie, for example, is Ofjohn; Mary becomes Ofstuart.

Then, seated in a circle, we begin class.

Special Focus: The Importance of Tone

"Wow! I get it."

"Offred is not a real name."

"Her name signifies her status: an object, a possession."

The class speculates on how this namelessness, this loss of personal identity, affects the characters and how it might relate to the meaning of the work that we are about to study. It is important to have students explore possibilities of themes rather than to have the instructor enumerate a list of meanings.

Since we assign the name tags after they have read only the first few chapters of the book, this student discovery method works well. Students are then asked to comment on the book's title in a five-minute quickwrite. This helps them consider the title and how it relates to both tone and possible meanings. In pairs, and then with the entire group, they share their thoughts. We repeat this exercise with the three epigrams with which the novel begins.

The "historical notes" at the end of the book lend themselves well to annotation. Students circle words they deem important, put question marks by lines they don't understand and checkmarks by "loaded" words they assume develop tone. Then the class, seated in a circle, discusses this section. Students are encouraged to talk to one another and to question one another. Over the years, this has been the most difficult section in terms of tone for my students. The anthropologists seem serious and scientific. Yet the keynote speaker at the symposium, with his pedantic and condescending tone, underscores how prejudice is still perpetuated two hundred years after the novel's events—a frightening prospect. The students, through guided and careful textual examination, annotation, and discussion, uncover his tone and Atwood's purpose.

Seminars engage the students as workers. Relinquishing the role of "sage," the instructor enables the students to discover the complexities and subtleties in the text. As a guide from the sidelines, the teacher facilitates but does not dictate. Through discussion and debate, students realize how framing the novel between the three epigraphs at the beginning and the symposium at the end develops Atwood's satirical view of contemporary society.

Seminars also provide opportunities for a thorough discussion of open-ended questions, eliciting a myriad of responses. No one answer is correct. Students listen, process, synthesize. They think.

Peeling the Onion: Calling All Thespians

The Handmaid's Tale is not simply a feminist tract on procreation and dehumanization. Nor is its tone purely satirical. Peeling the onion and looking at its many layers helps in understanding its many tones.

But first, students need to become familiar with as many tone words as possible. Using a list of tone words I provide (there are many sources for such lists in textbooks and handbooks of literary analysis, or you can create your own), students find a quote from Atwood's novel to which the assigned word applies. Or, as my colleague Sandra Igualada has suggested, they make up something a character would say. Working alone or with a partner, they perform their lines. There usually is some discussion about some of the choices. For example, a student can try out several different tones (bitter, candid, cynical, lugubrious) when reciting Offred's words, "We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print. It gave us more freedom." The choice depends upon the reader's understanding of her character. Most important, students do realize that here Atwood's intentions are satirical.

Are Offred's memory lapses disingenuous ploys and pleas for sympathy? Is her forgetfulness genuine? Answering these questions forms the core of many of the skits performed. Once again, the questions dominate the discussion. All reasonable responses are carefully considered.

Offred relates her story in an objective, matter-of-fact, often neutral tone. How does this add to her reliability as a narrator and to Atwood's purpose? By making Offred credible, Atwood leads readers to sympathize with her plight. Her horrific—but understated—experiences are therefore accentuated. Her seemingly innocent asides are seen to be pointed. "How furious Serena Joy must be, now that she's been taken at her word." Her longing for love, her memories of her past—these nostalgic moments seem to remind the reader how precious freedom is—and how difficult to preserve.

Another activity that has worked is to give students passages that have been identified as ironic. Working alone or in pairs, they are to rewrite the passage—in a different tone. Each group then reads what it has written. Students realize the importance of point of view, word choice, and syntax in developing tone. Once students understand and can identify many tones, discussions ensue on how these affect the novel's meanings. The book is humorous, and its varieties of ridicule are effective. For example: Offred, in her sleazy bunny outfit, shoved to the floor of the car racing to Jezebel. Atwood's point that

Special Focus: The Importance of Tone

Playboy clubs demean women is easily discerned—some might say too easily to make for a really complex tone at certain moments; in fact, a good class discussion can arise out of the issue of complexity. Is Atwood preaching to the choir; is there anything that cuts against the more obvious reading, once it has been grasped? Offred questions whether a deity is truly listening to the Soul Scrolls; the reader intuits Atwood's response. Looking for shifts in tone in Offred's internal monologues perhaps enables skeptical students to recognize the novel's complexities.

The Handmaid's Tale challenges us to facilitate our students' understanding of its many tones and nuances. By using and adapting the learning theories espoused by Bloom, Gardner, and Adler, students are the workers who mine this gold vein. Epiphanies abound. Best of all, after reading the novel, students discuss complex ideas relevant to their own lives and the world they inhabit. They recognize the sophistry of the Commander's omelet argument. Although formed by an egg and a sperm, people are not eggs ready to be made into omelets.

Students discuss the tensions between male and female. They become aware of the political nature of fiction. Environmental issues are brought to the fore. Are women accomplices in their own victimization? "Atwood blames no one group, but indicts, by sheer exposure, those who espouse simplistic solutions that deny the rights and welfare of others" (Freibert 1988).

The novel's last words resonate: "Are there any questions?" Yes there are. That may be what it *is* all about.

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Writerly Reading

Daniel Orozco
University of Idaho
Moscow, Idaho

Moving Beyond "Answers" and "Meaning"

As a teacher of fiction writing, my primary goal is to train fiction readers. "Reading," I tell my class, "is the flip side of writing. Writers can't write fiction unless they know how to read fiction." The notion of reading fiction like a writer—what I call writerly reading—arose from my frustration during discussions of master works, the short stories of established writers whose works are models for craft. The problem: inexperienced readers who come to some conclusion about the story such that they stop engaging with the text. The problem manifests itself in two ways.

A reader will extract and distill some theme from a story and consider her job as a reader done.
Examples include reducing Gish Jen's "Who's Irish?" to a story of multicultural experience, a story about Chinese generational conflicts, or simplifying Denis Johnson's "Emergency" to a vicarious exploration of drug addiction, period. In these cases, the settings of both works are so alien, so "other," to many (young, white, middle-class) students that as readers they are unable to engage the narrative experience beyond their own limited experience. So, understandably, their only recourse is: Isn't it *interesting* being Chinese! How *about* those junkies!

A reader will render judgment upon the protagonist of a story—generally articulated as "I liked him" or "I didn't like him"—and consider his job as a reader done.
Examples include judging the protagonist of Lorrie Moore's "You're Ugly, Too" to be an angry, embittered woman who needs to lighten up, or judging the protagonists of Andre Dubus's "The Fat Girl" and George Saunders's "The 400-Pound CEO" to be weak and self-pitying pessimists who just need to exercise some willpower and go on diets. The problem here is the reader's inexperience in recognizing *tone*—the suggestive and allusive narratorial attitude toward a protagonist that often works in tension against the reader's judgments. Lorrie Moore's Zoë Hendricks is a perpetually annoyed and miserably unhappy character, engaging in bouts of caustic humor that alienate her from others in the story. But we laugh at her jokes; the narrating tone is compassionate and generous

toward her. Saunders's nameless protagonist is—in the world of the story he narrates—a self-pitying bore, but to us, the readers, he is funny and perceptive and kind, revealing facets of character that no one in the story recognizes.

Students have been trained to read a text by finding its "answer" and arriving at its "meaning." Thus, "reading" a story for many students means closing a door on it, rather than opening one. How, then, to get students to move beyond these summary judgments of dramatic experience? How to get them to engage with the complexities of the drama?

Banish "Theme" from the Discussion (or at Least Save It for Last)

The task of the fiction writer is to engage the reader via dramatized experience—via action and reaction, the juxtaposition of events through time, and the concrete details of setting and character. This is where fiction writing begins, and this is where fiction reading begins too.

Vladimir Nabokov said it best:

> In reading, one should notice and fondle details. There is nothing wrong about the moonshine of generalization when it comes *after* the sunny trifles of the book have been lovingly collected. If one begins with a ready-made generalization, one begins at the wrong end and travels away from the book before one has started to understand it.*

One way to deflect broad thematic readings is to ask not "What is this story about?" but rather "What happens in this story?" This question—which of course will lead to the question, "How does the writer make these things happen?"—engages the story on its own terms and demands first of all a particularity of response that leads to a thorough examination of the story as it unfolds.

Distinguish Between Sympathy and Empathy

The task of the fiction writer is to dramatize the complexities of human experience. This often requires the writer to create characters that are complexly ambiguous, problematic, and, yes, unlikable. A writer cannot write a complex character if the

* Vladimir Nabokov, "Good Readers and Good Writers," in *Lectures on Literature*, Fredson Bowers, ed., 1 (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1980).

writer cannot somehow understand the complexity of that character: her motives, needs, and desires. A writer doesn't have to like—or sympathize with—his character. But a writer *must* understand—or empathize with—the character. And so must a reader.

When your students begin judging the protagonist—"I liked him" or "I didn't like her"—that is the time to clarify the distinction between sympathy and empathy. I have gone so far as to tell my students, "I don't care whether you *like* Zoë Hendricks or not. Tell me about *what* she does and *what* she says, and *how* she reveals herself in this story." These are small but essential pedagogical moves to get your students to delay their judgments. The hope is that, within that delay, they linger in the complexities of the text and engage in a writerly reading of a story, a reading that recognizes the nuance and complexities of dramatic experience, and, by extension, of human experience.

Special Focus: The Importance of Tone

Preparing Students for the AP Open Question

Mary Kay Harrington
Director, Writing Skills Program
California Polytechnic State University: San Luis Obispo

After three years as Question Leader for the AP English Literature Exam open question, I have a sense of what students need to consider as they prepare for the exam. I realize what a daunting task it is for AP teachers to see not only that their students read appropriate texts but also that they read widely. I suggest that students focus on a few central elements in order to do well on the open question.

Understanding Audience

All of us have difficulties with audience; placing ourselves in someone else's head is not easy, but it is an essential element for students to consider in this exam (and it is essential for them to use in life!). Following are some questions that students might consider in preparation for the AP open question, and some of these should be considered just before students write.

- Who reads my essay? What are they like? (They are 60 percent college English teachers and 40 percent high school AP teachers.)
- What are their expectations?
- What strategies might I employ to win them over?
- What can I do in my essay that will be unusual?
- What can I assume that the AP Readers have read?
- What are the risks I take if I choose a novel or play that is not on the suggested list that follows the prompt?
- What shall I do to convince AP Readers that the work I have chosen is of comparable literary merit to the list given?

Internalizing Critical Reading Strategies

- For each work a student reads, she should have an index card, computer file, or notebook on which she writes down the characters' names, questions the work evokes, a brief outline of the plot, and her comments (all of this in the student's own language).
- Students should cultivate a voice in their heads that argues, comments, and questions.

- Students should write comments as they read (on a note card or in the margin of the work itself). Underlining should be discouraged, in many cases, since it often becomes a passive act.
- Students should understand elements of point of view.
- They should train themselves to be active readers, asking questions of the text, such as: What is the central tension? What is the philosophic question posed?
- They should engage in predictions about the story line and the behavior of the characters.
- They should try to relate prior knowledge and their own experience to the ideas in the text.
- They should hold onto the details of the text and the significant moments (as they see them).
- They should try to be patient with unfamiliar syntax and attempt to parse difficult sentences.
- They should learn to reread.

Understanding the Prompt

Forty minutes is a very short time for students to read and understand the prompt, choose a work, and write an essay. No time should be wasted. Here are some tips for students:

- Read carefully the prompt and underline the major tasks (select, explain, and so forth).
- Remember to spell correctly any words used in the essay that come directly from the prompt. Readers are not overly concerned about spelling slips, but when words could be checked by reading the prompt and are not . . . well, Readers get irritated. For example, in 2003, students were asked to choose a tragic figure. Here are a few renditions of the words *tragedy* and *tragic:* trajedy, tratigy, tradegy, tragidy, tragedations, tragecic, traginess, tragicness.
- Understand the task. In 2004, students were asked to analyze a central question that the work raises. For many students, phrasing a central question in a literary work became a difficult act of brevity and clarity. We had some of the following attempts: "The question posed is clearly around the issue of . . . ," or "The question is one of responsibility and blame." Essentially, the subtext of the prompt asked for a central "philosophic" question. Instead, students took the idea of "question" to mean "What if?" So, "What if Oedipus would have taken a different road, changed his mind, and not killed his father?" This line of reasoning missed the point. Of course, we all know that consideration of

philosophic questions comes with emotional maturity and (sometimes) age and experience. Still, exposure to philosophic exploration could excite students and take them beyond the sometimes dull discussions of theme. In addition, students often did not seem to understand that there is an unstated hierarchy of questions central to a work of literature. For some students, *The Great Gatsby* asked if money could buy happiness or if the American Dream is possible. However, few asked the more interesting question that the novel poses: can one recapture the past? Clearly, some questions are more intellectually challenging and interesting than others.

Mastering College-Level Composition Skills

- Students should have some practice in writing a college-level persuasive essay under time pressure.
- Long plot summaries waste time—although if a student chooses a work that she thinks is appropriate to the question and perhaps unfamiliar to the AP Reader, it may be necessary for her to persuade the Reader of its importance by giving a *very brief* plot outline.
- Students should be reminded to skip clever attempts to introduce the topic and begin with the student's point/thesis.
- Students need to understand that retelling the plot is not analysis. Of course, analysis is one of the most difficult intellectual tasks to teach. The trick is persuading students to take apart the parts, hold them up to the light, and somehow see their relationship to the whole work.
- Students should be reminded that the organization of a composition helps guide the reader through the logic of the writer's argument. Not only does paragraphing guide the reader, but topic sentences are even more helpful. (No, this is *not* an endorsement of the five-paragraph structure or any form of formulaic writing.)
- Often, students waste time when, in their conclusion, they recapitulate their points, failing to see that the conclusion to a short essay is an opportunity to pull all the analyzed threads together, to "finish off" rather briefly. Edward Corbett makes the useful distinction between stopping rather than ending. In a short essay, a conclusion must be pithy, wise, and brief.

Choosing an Appropriate Text

- Students should be encouraged to give themselves a few minutes of thinking time to list a few texts that might best fit the prompt. They should choose a text that they know well.

- "To be or not to be?" Because *Hamlet* is the one Shakespeare play that many students read and know relatively well, and it fits many of the AP open question topics, many students choose it. *Hamlet* worked well for the last three years' of open question prompts. Some think that *Hamlet* ought to be avoided because so many students use it; however, if it is the work a student knows well and it fits the prompt, then by all means, we ought to encourage the student to use it.
- Details of the work: Certainly, under so much time pressure, students can be forgiven if they misspell a few words or confuse one character for another. However, more and more, AP Readers have noticed how careless students are about the characters' names. In the last two years, *Death of a Salesman* was an appropriate and common choice for many students. The following is a short list of names for Biff: Beef, Pip, Biv, Beck, Buddy, Buzz, Benji, Bliff, Billy, Bo, Harpy, Ernie, Skip, Biffy, Ted, Buffy, Pete, Sunny, and Mic. Although these slips do have elements of comedy, they often signal a pervasive pattern: a consistent lack of precision.
- Apart from knowing the plot and characters' names, students should have a sense of the work's meaning and the primary questions and concerns it raises.

Literary Merit

This topic brought about a great deal of discussion at the June 2004 AP Reading. After students read the prompt, they were instructed to "select a work from the list below or another novel or play of comparable literary merit." What constitutes literary merit? We all applaud the broadening of the canon to include contemporary works, ethnic literature, science fiction, and so forth, works that may appeal to students and encourage them to read more and maybe even become lifelong readers.

However, we found that this year, more than ever before, the works students chose were inappropriate (*The Cat in the Hat* and *Goodnight Moon*, for example) or works with which many AP Readers were unfamiliar (*School Days*, *Just a Couple of Days*, *Kit's Law*). Now, those who wrote about elementary-school books were probably faced with a task they could not attempt, or they may have been playing a small joke on the process. However, a more serious issue was that of texts that were not widely known or whose literary merit was questioned by the Readers. What to do? I suppose that we must work with students to find a definition for literary merit. We might posit, for example, that a work of literary merit has a distinctive voice and style, raises social concerns, moves from the particular to the universal, has layered complexity and ambiguity, and deals with basic universal truths.

Special Focus: The Importance of Tone

Perhaps discussion in the classroom about what constitutes literary merit might be in order. That is, we place stories, novels, plays, and movies in categories. For example, I could not stop reading *The Da Vinci Code*, but I would never argue that it has literary merit. It was a good read, and I recommend it, but the often-hackneyed quality of language and style alone keep it from most serious consideration of literary merit.

For students struggling to embrace reading, distinctions should be made between the books that may uphold the test of time and those that entertain (and are probably quite forgettable). In this country, we sometimes make the distinction between movies (*Spider-Man*) and cinema (*Blow-Up*). Introducing students to "good reads" is absolutely justifiable, but students need to develop their own definitions and categories of works of literary merit—just as all of us have.

AP students who succeed are careful readers who write with clarity and authority. Teaching these essentials is no easy task. Teaching them to read carefully and write clearly means that these skills carry over to their adult lives, to reading *USA Today* and their voting pamphlets. Much is at stake.

Tone and Voice in *Macbeth*

Donna Tanzer
Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design
and Marian College
Fond du Lac, Wisconsin

Drama, with its emphasis on voice, interpretation, and subtext, is a bountiful source of ideas for teaching an awareness of literary tone. Student actors, having worked with text and subtext, are often most adept at observing and articulating the nuances of tone in literature. An intense study of drama in the AP English Literature class can lead all of our students to begin developing this crucial sensitivity. The menacing atmosphere of secrecy, murder, and vengeance in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* provides abundant opportunities for students to hear a broad range of tones and voices in the sharply contrasting characters while they also consider varied interpretations supported by the text.

Listening for Tone: Performance and Oral Reading

Most high school students, even those experienced in reading Shakespeare, greatly benefit from physically hearing the bard's language either through reading the entire text aloud in class, through listening to a taped performance, or by doing both—reading selected passages aloud; pausing to discuss voice, characterization, tone, and theme; and then listening to professional renditions on tape or CD. Such dual exposure can guide students as they move beyond basic familiarity with plot and characterization and into a more nuanced awareness of tone and interpretation. Most students will not be able to hear tone inside their heads until they've heard it with their ears. As they read aloud, have them pause frequently, asking them to consider not only what is happening and how these developments delineate character and theme, but what is going on "beneath the text"—the subtext, or tone, that is conveyed with words. What choices could an actor or director make in delivering these lines? Which interpretations seem most valid and supportable? As the students then listen to a professional recording, they can hear and validate or even question the choices made by actors and directors.

Understanding Tone Through Diction

Although I will highlight several situations and lines where tone is significant, these examples offer only a few of the many starting points for rich discussions of text, meaning, and tone. An alert teacher will watch for moments when the students are most engaged; those are the scenes where they can dig deeply into the text. Keeping in mind that diction creates tone, students can tap their increasing comfort with Shakespearean

language as they look for words, lines, and phrases through which tone creates or amplifies meaning, underlies character portrayal and the unfolding of themes, or, through quick or subtle shifts in tone, signals crucial developments in the text.

Just as the dark and sinister opening of *Macbeth* establishes the brooding tone of the entire play, so, too, can it set the mood of intense and exciting classroom scrutiny of the play. The very presence of the witches suggests the bleak vision of the entire play, and the urgency of their diction as they prepare to meet Macbeth ("Where the place? / Upon the heath / There to meet with Macbeth") heightens their riddling reference to everything being its opposite: "Fair is foul, and foul is fair / Hover through the fog and filthy air." Only 10 lines into the play, we already sense uncertainty, secrecy, and the anticipation of evil deeds, underscored by the portentous sympathy between the stormy weather and "night's black agents." Point out to students that this "fair" versus "foul" contrast, a major theme of the play, is carried out tonally throughout act 1 with quick shifts between "dark scenes" (the opening witches' lines, the witches' anticipation of first meeting Macbeth, their prophecies, Macbeth's darkly brooding reflections that go straight to contemplation of murder, and Lady Macbeth's immediate thoughts of regicide) and "light scenes" (the captain's account of Macbeth's bravery and victory, Duncan's pride in the military victory, the honor of title bestowed on Macbeth, and the king's joyful plans to visit Macbeth). Students can demonstrate their increasing consciousness of tone by finding phrases and lines supporting these tonal states and shifts, which are audible in the alteration between iambic pentameter ("For brave Macbeth—well he deserves that name— / Disdaining fortune, with his brandished steel") and the witches' steadily droning trochaic tetrameter ("Weary sev' nights nine times nine, / Shall he dwindle, peak and pine"). The first act's vacillating tone derives from two very contradictory rhythms and its pervasive light and dark imagery.

Act 1, scene 5 provides opportunities for further examination of tone as we both see the loving, domestic relationship of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth ("my dearest partner of greatness," "[m]y dearest love") and hear their increasingly sinister words as secret thoughts of murder become the reality of their evil plans. Only a few short speeches into the first dialogue of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, Shakespeare gives us sufficient ambiguity to infer several possible tones, all plausible in the context of the tormented Macbeth who, as Lady Macbeth so well knows, "wouldst wrongly win" the coveted throne. After Lady Macbeth's effusive greeting ("Great Glamis! Worthy Cawdor!"), Macbeth raises the topic of Duncan: "My dearest love, / Duncan comes here tonight." These short, unadorned lines convey a tone of hesitancy: he knows he wants to talk about Duncan, the only obstacle to the throne, but he will let Lady Macbeth take the lead in planning murder. She, too, is

cautious, perhaps breathless at the thought of Duncan being so near and the murderous plans taking substance: "And when goes hence?" Macbeth's short reply— "Tomorrow, as he purposes" —opens the door to the study of ambiguity in tone, leading students to interpret for themselves the extent of Macbeth's villainy at this point. Is his answer purely factual and guileless ("he's leaving tomorrow") or imbued with further implications ("He *thinks* he's leaving, but we know otherwise") of a conspiratorial Macbeth who has already committed himself to murder? A Macbeth who is still vacillating could convey indecision ("He thinks he'll leave tomorrow, but will he? Can we stop him?") or dawning awareness ("Tomorrow . . . but maybe not: I see what you're suggesting") or urgency ("We'd best be about it if we're going to do it").

Tone and Symbolism: Water and Blood

As they examine the symbolism of water and blood that plays out so vividly in *Macbeth*, students should certainly look closely at Lady Macbeth's tone in act 2, scene 2 and the despondent, remorseful echoes of her words in act 5, scene 1. Consider Macbeth's hyperbole after he has killed Duncan: "Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand? No; this my hand will rather / the multitudinous seas incarnadine, / Making the green one red." He is horrified, panicked, and rueful if not remorseful ("Wake Duncan with thy knocking! I would thou couldst!"), but it is Lady Macbeth's tone throughout this scene that students should see as the more meaningful development.

First, they might notice that she cannot herself commit the murder because the sleeping Duncan reminds her of her father: "Had he not resembled / My father as he slept, I had done 't." These words reveal the first fissure in the icy resolve she has shown to this point. But she is unimaginatively literal as she impatiently chides Macbeth for being unwilling to bring the bloody daggers back into the murder room: "Infirm of purpose! / Give me the daggers. The sleeping and the dead / Are but as pictures." Can students see in these words not only controlling impatience but a too-easy assumption that the deed can be put behind them, and a deafness to the voice of conscience that will ultimately destroy her? An even richer dramatic irony clings to her later words, "A little water clears us of this deed." Students may see the same tone of ironic futility in these words as are found in the biblical Pontius Pilate's attempts to wash his hands of the blood of Christ. They should also be guided to see the ironic foreshadowing in these lines, possibly by returning to them later after witnessing Lady Macbeth's anguished sleepwalking in act 5, scene 1 and hearing the wrenching despair in the hyperbole that echoes Macbeth's earlier words: "Here's the smell of blood still. All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh, oh, oh!" Only by hearing her tone of unbending tenacity in act 2, scene 2 will students fully grasp the intensity of Lady Macbeth's later breakdown.

Special Focus: The Importance of Tone

Reversals in Character Through Tonal Shifts

Working through the play, students can also note that the vacillating, hesitant Macbeth gradually becomes inured to killing while the once resolute Lady Macbeth, no longer in his confidence, begins to crack. Careful attention to the language of the play will reveal many instances of these reversals. A quiet but important domestic moment occurs in act 3, scene 2, where Lady Macbeth's tone reveals increasing despair in a short soliloquy: "Naught's had, all's spent, / Where our desire is got without content: / 'Tis safer to be that which we destroy / Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy." Students should listen carefully for Lady Macbeth's sudden shift to a tone of forced optimism as Macbeth enters and she greets him, curbing the naked emotion we have just witnessed. As she tries to pacify her husband with her banal assurance ("What's done is done"), it is primarily her own misgivings she tries to quell. Students can no doubt relate to the experience of affirming something that's not quite true in an effort to persuade themselves as much as their listeners. Lady Macbeth's tone, but not her underlying mood, changes as she takes on her perceived role of loving, dutiful wife—trying to mollify her vexed husband with empty words that fail them both.

The Banquet Scene: Staging in the Classroom

In its vivid spectacle, the banquet scene (act 3, scene 4) provides more evidence of these character reversals and, more significantly, disturbing signs of the increasing disorder effected by Macbeth's rule. Acting out this scene in the classroom is a powerful way to illustrate just how crazed and bloodthirsty Macbeth has become and how horribly Scotland is suffering under its evil sovereign.

Teachers without directing experience can comfortably incorporate minimal staging in the English classroom. Simply set up two desks or chairs at the front of the room for the monarchs and turn the remaining tables or desks to face each other in a manner suggesting a long banquet table. Every student should take part in this scene, with Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, and the ghost at the front of the class and all others seated at the table; such an arrangement best allows the students to feel in their bones the tension and horror of this spectacle. Even the two students who initially play the murderers at the top of the scene should return to the table where the lords and ladies all rise, sit, and toast when indicated in the text. The student playing Banquo's ghost should hide (a map or projection screen works effectively), entering—and sitting in Macbeth's seat—only when Macbeth calls him to the table, toasts him ("I drink . . . to our dear friend Banquo, whom we miss"), or expresses distress at his absence. The black humor of Banquo's conveniently "agreeable" appearances plays nicely in the classroom, but more importantly, students enact and witness the horror of a sovereign ruler going mad before their eyes. Moreover,

acting out this scene will clarify the points where Macbeth alternately addresses the ghost, Lady Macbeth, and his guests and where Lady Macbeth speaks to Macbeth only or to the guests. The scene provides a paradoxical tone (bringing again to mind the "fair is foul" theme) as Macbeth affirms his well-being, dismissing his outbursts as "a strange infirmity, which is nothing / To those that know me" only to fly into hysterical rage at the sight of the bloody ghost he alone can see. The vivid imagery of Macbeth's ravings at the ghost anticipates the feverish tone we will encounter again in act 5.

There are rare moments when the irony and paradox that seam the text are deliberately applied by the characters. One occurs shortly after the banquet scene, as Lennox speaks to a lord in act 3, scene 6. In hushed, secretive tones, revealing the fearful state of Scotland at this point, Lennox drily informs the lord (and us) that "Things have been strangely borne." Irony intensifies to outright sarcasm in Lennox's speech beginning, "How it did grieve Macbeth!" Since this short and unspectacular scene may elude students' attention, it is worth emphasizing not only the important plot developments it offers (Macduff now lives in disgrace; Malcolm and the English king, Edward, have formed an alliance) but also the implication of Lennox's ironic tone in tracing Macbeth's loss of authority as the play progresses.

Macbeth's Intense Tone Shifts Through Crisis and Doom

As Macbeth's mania intensifies in act 4, students will find further opportunities to study tone—darkly supernatural riddles from the witches as Macbeth visits them a final time, the melodrama of Lady Macduff and her son heroically facing death, and the fearful, guarded tone of Malcolm accusing himself of imaginary faults before finally trusting that Macduff truly wants to see him restored to his rightful throne. However, it is the play's final short act through which students can absorb not only Lady Macbeth's despair and demise but Macbeth's mercurial shifts in tone as he recognizes his imminent doom. Act 5, scene 3 opens as Macbeth prepares for battle, trying unsuccessfully to convince himself that Birnam Wood cannot come to Dunsinane and that he need fear "no man of woman born." His boastful, overconfident tone betrays his growing doubt about the witches' riddles, and his insecurity, revealed in the frenzied insults he hurls at a terrified servant ("cream-faced loon," "lily-livered boy," "whey-face"), is quickly supplanted by introspection ("I have lived long enough. My way of life / Is fall'n into the sear, the yellow leaf"), which in turn gives way to bitter mockery of the doctor ("Throw physic to the dogs, I'll none of it"). Similarly, as act 5, scene 3 opens, Macbeth expresses restored confidence ("Our castle's strength / Will laugh a siege to scorn") but is soon moved by the cry of women to a state of subdued reminiscences ("I have almost forgot the taste of fears") and then, having learned of Lady Macbeth's death, voices his memorable reflections on life's futility ("Tomorrow and

tomorrow and tomorrow..."). His tone reverts again to rage ("Liar and slave!") when he is told of the "moving grove," and his dawning realization of the witches' duplicity renews his determination to play out his fate ("At least we'll die with harness on our back"). As Macbeth faces defeat and death throughout act 5, his abrupt tone shifts illustrate for students the remarkable complexity of human emotions in times of crisis and change.

Macbeth enthralls us—and our students—with its powerful characters, its tightly focused, suspenseful plot, its enduring theme, and Shakespeare's unparalleled language. Though these may seem sufficient to stimulate our students' literary taste buds as we satisfy our own palates, focusing on the extensive range of tones and voices can greatly enhance the overall study of this masterpiece. Such a concentration can deepen students' understanding of *Macbeth* while also solidifying their insights into tone as a fundamental and dynamic element of all literature.

Contributors

Information current as of original publish date of September 2005.

About the Editor

Carol Jago teaches English and is department chair at Santa Monica High School in Santa Monica, California. She also directs the California Reading and Literature Project at UCLA and edits the California Association of Teachers of English quarterly journal, *California English*. Carol has written a weekly education column for the *Los Angeles Times*, and her essays have appeared in *English Journal, Language Arts, NEA Today, The Christian Science Monitor,* and *GOAL Magazine* as well as in other newspapers across the nation. She is currently the content advisor for AP English Literature. She served as director of the National Council of Teachers of English Commission on Literature and as a member of NCTE's Secondary Section. NCTE has published her series *Nikki Giovanni in the Classroom, Alice Walker in the Classroom,* and *Sandra Cisneros in the Classroom*. Her books *With Rigor for All: Teaching the Classics to Contemporary Students, Beyond Standards: Excellence in the High School English Classroom,* and *Cohesive Writing: Why Concept Is Not Enough* are published by Heinemann. Her book *Classics in the Classroom: Designing Accessible Literature Lessons* (Heinemann 2004) was published with an accompanying video. In August 2005, Heinemann will publish Carol's latest book, *Papers, Papers, Papers: An English Teacher's Survival Guide*. Jago served on the planning committee for the 2009 NAEP Reading Framework and currently is consulting with the American Institute of Research on the NAEP Writing Assessment.

Robin Aufses is the English department chair at J. F. Kennedy High School in Bellmore, New York. She taught high school English for many years to students at all levels, and she has been an AP English teacher for the last seven years. As department chair, she has the pleasure of training young teachers, many of whom will have the chance to teach AP early in their careers.

Ellen Greenblatt teaches at University High School in California and online for UCLA Extension. She has been a member of the AP English Development Committee, member and chair of the SAT Subject Test in Literature development committee, and an AP Reader and Table Leader. She leads workshops for teachers in the United States and abroad. Recently, she has written for the College Board about the work of Richard Rodriguez and about teaching poetry.

Special Focus: The Importance of Tone

Renee H. Shea is a professor of English at Bowie State University in Maryland, where she directed the freshman composition program for five years. She teaches courses in rhetoric, women's studies, and world literature as well as freshman composition. A former high school AP English teacher as well as Reader and Question Leader for both the AP English Language and Literature Exams, she is currently the content adviser for AP English Language. Dr. Shea is a member of the NCTE Commission on Literature.

Steven Fox taught English for more than 30 years at Shaker Heights High School in Ohio. He was named the Outstanding English Language Arts Educator in 1988 by the Ohio Council of Teachers of English Language Arts, and in the same year he was selected for a Fulbright Teaching Exchange to England, allowing him to spend a year teaching in rural Lincolnshire. He has been a Reader and Table Leader at both the AP English Literature and AP English Language Examination Readings, and he conducts one-day AP training conferences and weeklong summer institutes in both AP English areas and on several Pre-AP topics. He is the author of the critical reading and writing sections of the College Board's *Official SAT Study Guide* and its accompanying *Teacher's Guide*. In addition to his work with the College Board, he is a consultant, author, and staff developer for the AVID Center of San Diego.

Elfie Israel has been teaching AP English Language and AP English Literature since 1982. She was an AP Reader for seven years. A graduate of Barnard College, she earned her doctorate from Nova Southeastern University. Some of her publications include Amsco's *AP Literature and Composition: Preparing for the Advanced Placement Examination*, "Examining Multiple Perspectives in Literature" in *Inquiry and the Literary Text*, several *English Journal* articles, and two practicums published in ERIC. A mentor for both inexperienced and experienced teachers, she facilitates workshops for the College Board and the Florida League of Teachers.

Daniel Orozco has taught fiction writing for more than 10 years at the University of Washington, San Francisco State University, and Stanford University, where he was the Jones Lecturer in Fiction from 1999 to 2002. His stories have appeared in a number of journals and magazines, most recently in *Harper's Magazine*, and have been selected for inclusion in the *Best American Short Stories* and *Pushcart Prize* anthologies. He is currently assistant professor of English in the Creative Writing Program at the University of Idaho.

Special Focus: The Importance of Tone

Mary Kay Harrington directs the Writing Skills Program at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo. From 1999 to 2002, she was the California State University English faculty consultant to the chancellor's office. She has been on a number of statewide committees: the English Placement Test Development Committee, the Academic Literacies task force, the Graduation Writing Assessment Requirement review committee, and the Non-Fiction Reading and Writing in the 12th Grade task force. In the spring of 2005, she conducted workshops in Beirut, Lebanon, for college English teachers who wanted to find ways to motivate their students as well as ways to assess their work. From 2002 until the present, she has been a Question Leader for the AP Literature Exam.

Donna Tanzer teaches composition at the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design and a graduate-level education course at Marian College in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. She previously taught all levels of high school English, including AP English Literature, at West Allis Central High School in West Allis, Wisconsin. As a high school theatre director, Tanzer has focused primarily on bringing classic literary works to the stage, including Shakespearean comedy and an original stage adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*.

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