

## MsEffie's List of Poetry Essay Prompts for Advanced Placement® English Literature Exams, 1970-2026\*

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2026: "Marking Time" by Christopher Gilbert

**Prompt:** In Christopher Gilbert's poem "Marking Time," published in 1984, the speaker observes his surroundings during a morning jog. Read the poem carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how Gilbert uses literary elements and techniques to convey the speaker's complex reflections while jogging.

2025, Set 1: "Monologue for Saint Louis" by Colleen McElroy

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

2025, Set 2: "Two Guitars" by Victor Hernández Cruz

**Prompt:** In Victor Hernández Cruz's poem "Two Guitars," published in 2001, the speaker imagines that two guitars are alive and engaging in conversation about their musical experiences. Read the poem carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how Hernández Cruz uses literary elements and techniques to convey a complex portrayal of the guitars' musical world.

2024, Set 1: "To a Star Seen at Twilight" by John Rollin Ridge

**Prompt:** In John Rollin Ridge's poem "To a Star Seen at Twilight," published in 1868, the speaker admires a solitary star shining at twilight and considers its significance. Read the poem carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how Ridge uses literary elements and techniques to convey the speaker's complex reflection on the star.

2024, Set 2: "On Summer" by George Moses Horton

**Prompt:** In George Moses Horton's poem "On Summer," published in 1829, the author describes multiple aspects of summer in a rural area. Read the poem carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how Horton uses literary elements and techniques to develop a complex portrayal of the setting.

2023, Set 1: "Autumn" by Alice Cary

**Prompt:** In Alice Cary's poem "Autumn," published in 1874, the speaker contemplates the onset of autumn. Read the poem carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how Cary uses literary elements and techniques to convey the speaker's complex response to the changing seasons.

2023, Set 2: "The Barren Moors" by William Ellery Channing

**Prompt:** In William Ellery Channing's poem "The Barren Moors," published in 1843, the speaker addresses moors, open expanses of wild, uncultivated land. Read the poem carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how Channing uses literary elements and techniques to develop a complex portrayal of the speaker's experience of this natural setting.

2022 Poem: "Shaving" by Richard Blanco

**Prompt:** In Richard Blanco's poem "Shaving," published in 1998, the speaker writes about the act of shaving. Read the poem carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how Blanco uses literary elements and techniques to develop the speaker's complex associations with the ritual of shaving.

2021 Poem: "The Man with the Saxophone" by Ai

**Prompt:** In Ai's poem "The Man with the Saxophone," published in 1985, the speaker encounters a man playing a saxophone. Read the poem carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how Ai uses literary elements and techniques to convey the complexity of the speaker's encounter with the saxophone player at that particular time and place.

## 2020 No Poem

2019 Poem: “The Landlady” by P. K. Page

**Prompt:** Carefully read P. K. Page’s 1943 poem “The Landlady.” Then, in a well-organized essay, analyze the speaker’s complex portrayal of the landlady. You may wish to consider such elements as imagery, selection of detail, and tone.

2018 Poem: “Plants” (Olive Senior)

**Prompt:** Carefully read Olive Senior’s poem, “Plants.” Then, in a well-organized essay, analyze how the poet portrays the complex relationships among the speaker, the implied audience, and plant life. You may wish to consider the author’s use of such literary techniques as syntax, diction, and figurative language.

2017 Poem: “The Myth of Music” (Rachel M. Harper)

**Prompt:** The following poem is by Rachel M. Harper. Read the poem carefully. Then, considering such elements as imagery, form, and tone, write a well-organized essay in which you analyze the relationship between music and the speaker’s complex memories of her family.

2016 Poem: “The Juggler” (Richard Wilbur)

**Prompt:** Read carefully the following poem by Richard Wilbur, first published in 1949. Then, write an essay in which you analyze how the speaker describes the juggler and what that description reveals about the speaker. You may wish to consider poetic elements such as imagery, figurative language, and tone.

2016B Poem: “London’s Summer Morning” (Mary Robinson)

**Prompt:** In the following poem by Mary Robinson (1758–1800), the speaker describes a summer morning in London. Read the poem carefully. Then write a well-developed essay in which you analyze how the speaker characterizes the city as a source of inspiration for the poet. You may wish to consider such literary elements as imagery, structure, and tone.

2015 Poem: “XIV” (Derek Walcott)

**Prompt:** In the following poem by Caribbean writer Derek Walcott, the speaker recalls a childhood experience of visiting an elderly woman storyteller. Read the poem carefully. Then, in a well-developed essay, discuss the speaker’s recollection and analyze how Walcott uses poetic devices to convey the significance of the experience.

2015B Poem: “On Not Shoplifting” Louise Bogan’s *The Blue Estuaries* (Julia Alvarez)

**Prompt:** Read carefully the following poem by Julia Alvarez. Then write a well-organized essay in which you analyze how Alvarez conveys the speaker’s discoveries. You may wish to consider such poetic devices as tone, imagery, and selection of detail.

2014 Poem: “For That He Looked Not upon Her” (George Gascoigne)

**Prompt:** The following poem is by the sixteenth-century English poet George Gascoigne. Read the poem carefully. Then write an essay in which you analyze how the complex attitude of the speaker is developed through such devices as form, diction, and imagery.

2013 Poem: “The Black Walnut Tree” (Mary Oliver)

**Prompt:** Carefully read the following poem by Mary Oliver. Then write a well-organized essay in which you analyze how Oliver conveys the relationship between the tree and family through the use of figurative language and other poetic techniques.

2013B Poems: “Remember” (Christina Rossetti) and “The Cross of Snow” (Henry Wadsworth Longfellow)

**Prompt:** The two sonnets below address death and remembrance, but from different perspectives. Read the poems carefully. Then write a well-organized essay in which you compare and contrast how the poets use literary techniques to explore the grieving process.

2012 Poem: “Thou Blind Man’s Mark” (Sir Philip Sidney)

**Prompt:** In the following poem by Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586), the speaker addresses the subject of desire. Read the poem carefully. Then write a well-developed essay in which you analyze how poetic devices help to convey the speaker’s complex attitude toward desire.

2011 Poem: “A Story” (Li-Young Lee)

**Prompt:** The following poem is by the contemporary poet Li-Young Lee. Read the poem carefully. Then write a well-developed essay in which you analyze how the poet conveys the complex relationship of the father and the son through the use of literary devices such as point of view and structure.

2011B Poem: “An Echo Sonnet” (Robert Pack)

**Prompt:** Read carefully the following poem by Robert Pack, paying close attention to the relationship between form and meaning. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how the literary techniques used in this poem contribute to its meaning.

2010 Poem: “The Century Quilt” (Marilyn Nelson Waniek)

**Prompt:** Write an essay analyzing how Waniek uses literary techniques to develop the complex meanings that the speaker attributes to The Century Quilt. You may wish to consider such elements as structure, imagery, and tone.

2010B Poems: “To Sir John Lade, on His Coming of Age” (Samuel Johnson) and “When I Was One-and-Twenty” (A. E. Housman)

**Prompt:** Each of the two poems below is concerned with a young man at the age of twenty-one, traditionally the age of adulthood. Read the two poems carefully. Then write a well-organized essay in which you compare and contrast the poems, analyzing the poetic techniques, such as point of view and tone, that each writer uses to make his point about coming of age.

2009 Speech from *Henry VIII* (William Shakespeare)

**Prompt:** In the following speech, Cardinal Wolsey considers his sudden downfall from his position as advisor to the king. Spokesmen for the king have just left Wolsey alone on stage. Read the speech carefully. Then write a well-organized essay in which you analyze how Shakespeare uses elements such as allusion, figurative language, and tone to convey Wolsey’s complex response to his dismissal from court.

2009B Poem: “Icarus” (Edward Field)

**Prompt:** The following poem makes use of the Greek myth of Daedalus and Icarus. Read the poem carefully. Then write an essay in which you analyze how Field employs literary devices in adapting the Icarus myth to a contemporary setting.

2008 Poems “When I Have Fears” (John Keats) and “Mezzo Cammin” (Henry Wadsworth Longfellow)

**Prompt:** In the two poems below, Keats and Longfellow reflect on similar concerns. Read the poems carefully. Then write an essay in which you compare and contrast the two poems, analyzing the poetic techniques each writer uses to explore his particular situation.

2008B Poems: “Hawk Roosting” (Ted Hughes) and “Golden Retrievals” (Mark Doty)

**Prompt:** The following two poems present animal-eye views of the world. Read each poem carefully. Then write an essay in which you analyze the techniques used in the poems to characterize the speakers and convey differing views of the world.

2007 Poems: “A Barred Owl” (Richard Wilbur) and “The History Teacher” (Billy Collins)

**Prompt:** In the following two poems, adults provide explanations for children. Read the poems carefully. Then write an essay in which you compare and contrast the two poems, analyzing how each poet uses literary devices to make his point.

2007B Poem: “Here” (Philip Larkin)

**Prompt:** Read the following poem carefully. Then, write a well-organized essay in which you analyze the techniques the poet uses to convey his attitude toward the places he describes.

2006 Poem: “Evening Hawk” (Robert Penn Warren)

**Prompt:** Read the following poem carefully. Then write a well-organized essay in which you analyze how the poet uses language to describe the scene and to convey mood and meaning.

2006B Poem: “To Paint a Water Lily” (Ted Hughes)

**Prompt:** Read the following poem carefully. Then write an essay discussing how the poet uses literary techniques to reveal the speaker’s attitudes toward nature and the artist’s task.

2005 Poem: “The Chimney Sweeper” [1789 and 1794 versions] (William Blake)

**Prompt:** The poems below, published in 1789 and 1794, were written by William Blake in response to the condition of chimney sweeps. Usually small children were forced inside chimneys to clean their interiors. Read the two poems carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, compare and contrast the two poems, taking into consideration the poetic techniques Blake uses in each.

2005B Poems: “Five A.M.” (William Stafford) and “Five Flights Up” (Elizabeth Bishop)

**Prompt:** Carefully read the two poems below. Then in a well-organized essay compare the speakers’ reflections on their early morning surroundings and analyze the techniques the poets use to communicate the speakers’ different states of mind.

2004 Poems: “We Grow Accustomed to the Dark” (Emily Dickinson) and “Acquainted with the Night” (Robert Frost)

**Prompt:** The poems below are concerned with darkness and night. Read each poem carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, compare and contrast the poems, analyzing the significance of dark or night in each. In your essay, consider elements such as point of view, imagery, and structure.

2004B Poem: “Crossing the Swamp” (Mary Oliver)

**Prompt:** Read the following poem carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze the techniques the poet uses to develop the relationship between the speaker and the swamp.

2003 Poems: “ΕΡΩΣ” (Robert Bridges) and “Eros” (Anne Stevenson)

**Prompt:** The following poems are both concerned with Eros, the god of love in Greek mythology. Read the poems carefully. Then write an essay in which you compare and contrast the two concepts of Eros and analyze the techniques used to create them.

2003B Poem From *Modern Love* (George Meredith)

**Prompt:** The following poem is taken from *Modern Love*, a poetic sequence by the English writer George Meredith. Read the poem carefully. Then write a well-organized essay in which you analyze how the poet conveys a view of “modern love.”

2002 Poem: “The Convergence of the Twain” (Thomas Hardy)

**Prompt:** Read the following poem carefully. Then, taking into consideration the title of the poem, analyze how the poetic devices convey the speaker’s attitude toward the sinking of the ship.

2002B Poem: “If I Could Tell You” (W. H. Auden)

**Prompt:** The following poem is a villanelle, a form having strict rules of rhyme, meter, and repetition. Read the poem carefully. Then write a well-organized essay in which you analyze how the formal elements of the poem contribute to its meaning.

2001 Poems: "Douglass" by Paul Laurence Dunbar and "London, 1802" by William Wordsworth

**Prompt:** In each of the following poems, the speaker responds to the conditions of a particular place and time – England in 1802 in the first poem, the United States about 100 years later in the second. Read each poem carefully. Then write an essay in which you compare and contrast the two poems and analyze the relationship between them.

2000 Poems: Siren passage from the *Odyssey* (Homer) / "Siren Song" (Margaret Atwood)

**Prompt:** The story of Odysseus' encounter with the Sirens and their enchanting but deadly song appears in Greek epic poetry in Homer's *Odyssey*. An English translation of the episode is reprinted in the left column below. Margaret Atwood's poem in the right column is a modern commentary on the classical story. Read both texts carefully. Then write an essay in which you compare the portrayals of the Sirens. Your analysis should include discussion of tone, point of view, and whatever poetic devices (diction, imagery, etc.) seem most appropriate.

1999 Poem: "Blackberry-Picking" (Seamus Heaney)

**Prompt:** Read the following poem carefully, paying particular attention to the physical intensity of the language. Then write a well-organized essay in which you explain how the poet conveys not just a literal description of picking blackberries but a deeper understanding of the whole experience. You may wish to include analysis of such elements as diction, imagery, metaphor, rhyme, rhythm, and form.

1998 Poem: "It's a Woman's World" (Eavan Boland)

**Prompt:** The following poem was written by a contemporary Irish woman, Eavan Boland. Read the poem carefully and then write an essay in which you analyze how the poem reveals the speaker's complex conception of a "woman's world."

1997 Poem: "The Death of a Toad" (Richard Wilbur)

**Prompt:** Read the following poem carefully. Then write a well-organized essay in which you explain how formal elements such as structure, syntax, diction, and imagery reveal the speaker's response to the death of a toad.

1996 Poem: "The Author to Her Book" (Anne Bradstreet)

**Prompt:** Read carefully the following poem by the colonial American poet, Anne Bradstreet. Then write a well-organized essay in which you discuss how the poem's controlling metaphor expresses the complex attitude of the speaker.

1995 Poem: "The Broken Heart" (John Donne)

**Prompt:** Read the following poem carefully. Then, in a well-organized essay, analyze how the speaker uses the varied imagery of the poem to reveal his attitude toward the nature of love.

1994 Poems: "To Helen" (Edgar Allan Poe) and "Helen" (H.D.)

**Prompt:** The following two poems are about Helen of Troy. Renowned in the ancient world for her beauty, Helen was the wife of Menelaus, a Greek King. She was carried off to Troy by the Trojan prince Paris, and her abduction was the immediate cause of the Trojan War. Read the two poems carefully. Considering such elements as speaker, diction, imagery, form, and tone, write a well-organized essay in which you contrast the speakers' views of Helen.

1993 Poem: "The Centaur" (May Swenson)

**Prompt:** Read the following poem carefully. Then write an essay in which you discuss how such elements as language, imagery, structure, and point of view convey meaning in the poem.

1992 Poem: "The Prelude" (William Wordsworth)

**Prompt:** In the passage below, which comes from William Wordsworth's autobiographical poem "The Prelude," the speaker encounters unfamiliar aspects of the natural world. Write an essay in which you trace the speaker's changing responses to his experiences and explain how they are conveyed by the poem's diction, imagery, and tone.

1991 Poem: "The Last Night that She lived..." (Emily Dickinson)

**Prompt:** Write an essay in which you describe the speaker's attitude toward the woman's death. Using specific references from the text, show how the use of language reveals the speaker's attitude.

1990 Poem: Soliloquy from *Henry IV, Part II* (William Shakespeare)

**Prompt:** In the soliloquy, King Henry laments his inability to sleep. In a well-organized essay, briefly summarize the King's thoughts and analyze how the diction, imagery, and syntax help to convey his state of mind.

1989 Poem: "The Great Scarf of Birds" (John Updike)

**Prompt:** Write a well-organized essay in which you analyze how the poem's organization, diction, and figurative language prepare the reader for the speaker's concluding response.

1988 Poems: "Bright Star" (John Keats) and "Choose Something Like a Star" (Robert Frost)

**Prompt:** Read the following two poems very carefully, noting that the second includes an allusion to the first. Then write a well-organized essay in which you discuss their similarities and differences. In your essay, be sure to consider both theme and style.

1987 Poem: "Sow" (Sylvia Plath)

**Prompt:** Read the poem. Then write an essay in which you analyze the presentation of the sow. Consider particularly how the language of the poem reflects both the neighbor's and the narrator's perceptions of the sow and how the language determines the reader's perceptions. Be certain to discuss how the portrayal of the sow is enhanced by such features as diction, devices of sound, images, and allusions.

1986 Poem: "Ogun" (E. K. Braithwaite)

**Prompt:** Read the poem. You will note that it has two major sections that are joined by another section lines 21-26. Write an essay in which you discuss how the diction, imagery, and movement of verse in the poem reflect differences in tone and content between the two larger sections.

1985 Poems: "There Was A Boy" (William Wordsworth) and "The Most of It" (Robert Frost)

**Prompt:** These two poems present encounters with nature, but the two poets handle those encounters very differently. In a well-organized essay, distinguish between the attitudes (toward nature, toward the solitary individual, etc.) expressed in the poems and discuss the techniques that the poets use to present these attitudes. Be sure to support your statements with specific references.

1983 Poem: "Clocks and Lovers" (W. H. Auden)

**Prompt:** Write a well-organized essay in which you contrast the attitude of the clocks with that of the lover. Through careful analysis of the language and imagery, show how this contrast is important to the meaning of the poem.

1982 Poem: "The Groundhog" (Richard Eberhart)

**Prompt:** Write an essay in which you analyze how the language of the poem reflects the changing perceptions and emotions of the speaker as he considers the metamorphosis of the dead groundhog. Develop your essay with specific references to the text of the poem.

1981 Poem: "Storm Warnings" (Adrienne Rich)

**Prompt:** Write an essay in which you explain how the organization of the poem and the use of concrete details reveal both its literal and its metaphorical meanings. In your discussion, show how both of these meanings relate to the title.

1980 Poem: “One Art” (Elizabeth Bishop)

**Prompt:** Write an essay in which you describe how the speaker’s attitude toward loss in lines 16-19 is related to her attitude toward loss in lines 1-15. Using specific references to the text, show how verse form and language contribute to the reader’s understanding of these attitudes.

1979 Poems: “Spring And All” (William Carlos Williams) and “For Jane Meyers” (Louise Gluck)

**Prompt:** Read the two poems carefully. Then write a well-organized essay in which you show how the attitudes towards the coming of spring implied in these two poems differ from each other. Support your statements with specific references to the texts.

1978 Poem: “Law Like Love” (W. H. Auden)

**Prompt:** Read the poem and then write an essay discussing the differences between the conceptions of ‘law’ in lines 1-34 and those in lines 35-60.

1977 Poem: “Piano” [2 poems with the same name] (D. H. Lawrence)

**Prompt:** Read both poems carefully and then write an essay in which you explain what characteristics of the second poem make it better than the first. Refer specifically to details of both poems.

1976 Poem: “Poetry of Departures” (Philip Larkin)

**Prompt:** Write an essay in which you discuss how the poem’s diction (choice of words) reveals his attitude toward the two ways of living mentioned in the poem.

1974 Poem: from “The Prologue: Downstream” by Thomas Kinsella (Not given on exam)

**Prompt:** Write a unified essay in which you relate the imagery of the last stanza to the speaker’s view of himself earlier in the poem and to his view of how others see poets.

1971 Poem: “The Unknown Citizen” (W.H. Auden)

**Prompt:** In a brief essay, identify at least two of the implications implicit in the society reflected in the poem. Support your statements by specific references to the poem.

1970 Poem: “Elegy for Jane” (Theodore Roethke)

**Prompt:** Write an essay in which you describe the speaker’s attitude toward his former student, Jane.