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Questioning the Text: Literary Analysis and Multiple-Choice Testing

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Teachers of literature generally make little use of multiple-choice questions, believing, I think correctly, that the best way to judge a student's ability to analyze and interpret a literary text is to ask him or her to write an essay about it. But the devising of sets of multiple-choice questions on a poem or prose passage can be a useful exercise for both teachers and students because it obliges them to confront the question of what a reader must deal with in a text in order to arrive at an understanding of it. Further, because every multiple-choice question can have only one correct or "best" answer if it is to be valid, the format is instructive in showing us the limits of consensus, in revealing the aspects of the text about which we can agree, and in establishing a boundary where objective understanding ends and subjective response and interpretation begin. Finally, such an exercise is useful because it requires readers to scrutinize the text critically, with an eye not only to their own responses but to those of the other readers who may be obliged to answer the questions they devise.

Before going further, let me try to define the kind of multiple-choice questions I have in mind. Usually we encounter the format on tests of factual information, for example, "Which of the following is the capital of Switzerland," followed by four choices: "Geneva, Zurich, Lausanne, Berne." We might agree that offering choices makes coming up with the answer somewhat easier than if names of cities were not suggested. But statisticians tell us that, given a fair number of such questions, the element of chance in choosing the correct answer can be made negligible and that a person's knowledge of say, world capitals, can be accurately and reliably assessed. Applying this sort of question to the literary realm, we can get a good idea of whether students know who wrote *Moby Dick* or whether the eighteenth-

century novelist was Fanny Burney or Fanny Brawne—important aspects of cultural literacy perhaps, but not very obviously useful in helping students to think carefully and analytically about the literary texts themselves.

More interesting and valuable for this purpose are the multiple-choice questions that are based on a text, usually an excerpt from a novel, play, or poem, or, where length permits, a complete work. Unless one is familiar with this sort of analytical question used, for example, on the College Board's AP Examinations in English and in French Literature, one might well imagine that the questions propose risibly reductive readings of famous works: "Which of the following is the meaning of *Pride and Prejudice*?" followed by four or five neat and pithy summaries gleaned from popular literary manuals. In fact, as we shall see, the analytical multiple-choice question is designed to examine specific elements in a given text, and, as a set of questions, to move from the most basic level—comprehension of words or phrases in context, identification of grammatical antecedent—through the recognition of structural patterns, rhetorical procedures, and figures of speech, to the recognition or interpretation of imagery, tone, purpose, genre, and theme.

The purpose of the teachers who develop the literature examinations for the College Board is to test the students' ability to do close reading. But even though one strives to keep the questions discrete, that is, not to let the answer to one question help to give away the answer to another, the working through of a set of multiple-choice questions on a literary text not only tests a student's reading skill but also helps him or her to understand the text itself. This is so because the questions asked are pertinent to crucial points in the text; they are leading questions in that they direct students to deal with elements that they, as more passive readers, serenely sheltered from the importunity of the test maker, can happily (or, from a teacher's viewpoint, not so happily) choose to ignore. The fact that a limited number of different choices is provided also serves to direct a student's reading in much the same way that, met with blank, silent faces in response to his or her questioning, a classroom teacher may suggest several alternative possibilities: "What seems to be Wordsworth's attitude here? (Pause) Well, is he infuriated, acquiescent, delighted?" The hope of such teaching, of course, is not merely that the students can choose correct answers to pertinent questions, but that they will themselves develop the far more important skill of being able to formulate

such leading questions once the teacher is no longer there to prod and challenge in good Socratic style. Unless they, as solitary readers, can learn to ask the right questions of the text, they can never hope to have it yield its right answers.

From what I have said, it should be clear that I do believe that texts have meanings and purposes that readers can understand and that one can ask questions that have right or at least "best" answers. I am also aware, however, that not all the pertinent questions one can think to put to a text can be confined within the multiple-choice format, which insists that choice (A) be superior to choices (B), (C), (D), and (E), or even that those questions that are most interesting can be so neatly answered. Further, it is clear that some texts lend themselves more readily to this sort of question-answer format than do some others and that still others are, with this method, practically inscrutable. Most difficult to deal with are texts in which language is used "transparently" to express ideas in a prosaic, straightforward way, or, on the other hand, texts of such obscurity, multiplicity of meaning, or ambiguity that they either defy interpretation or actively encourage various readings. (Sometimes, however, the polysemous nature of poetic language can be dealt with by presenting, say, four possible readings of an image or a line, and asking students to choose the one *least* permitted by the text.) In a great many texts, however, one can make use of the multiple-choice format to do the sort of spadework that readers must do before they can cogently formulate an interpretation. Both answering and devising such questions can serve to hold readers to the letter of the text before they attempt to spell out its darker secrets.

Although I will suggest that students might be asked to try to write such questions themselves, they had probably better begin by responding to and discussing a set that has been devised by the teacher. It is important to choose a text that will yield a fair number of questions. Once a text has been selected, the questions should address themselves to the points that one must notice in order to follow its argument or literal sense. One might begin with words whose context gives their meaning a particular spin or with unusual syntactical turns, indeed with any aspect (an ellipsis, odd transition, or juxtaposition) that is puzzling or needs to be explained. Then one might consider principles of organization or relationships between parts in an attempt to define the structure and movement of the text. All the attentive

reading skills that one has developed can be brought into play. Finally, one can attempt to define the tone or mood of the piece, to relate it to other texts, to situate it with regard to genre, period, or theme.

The questions that one invents will not differ greatly from those that one might pose orally in class as part of a close reading or stylistic analysis. The difference in writing them in the multiple-choice format, however, is that one must not only have a question with an answer in mind but also three or four other answers, plausible but ultimately partial or wrong-headed notions about the text that inexperienced or inattentive readers might well trap themselves with. In devising them, one's experience either with typical student misreading or with one's own should be of great help. Inventing the wrong options ("distracters" in the ETS jargon) also forces the question writer to look even more closely at the text, since these options will be attractive to the test taker only if they are based on some element in the text itself that can be misconstrued. (I should add that it is precisely at this point that one may be forced to start over or to abandon asking a particular question because the text actually allows several reasonable interpretations of a particular point, rather than just one.)

Let me turn now for illustration to a set of questions on a passage from Wordsworth's *The Prelude* that appeared on a recent AP English Examination. I have chosen this text because, although at first glance it may not seem to possess the kind of complexity that I have just said lends itself best to explication through multiple-choice questions, the statistical results show that it presented an interesting range of challenges for the students who took the examination.

The ten questions that follow the poem include questions requiring students to follow the grammar and syntax of the poem (32, 33), to define a word in context (36), to paraphrase the text (34), to notice repetition (35, 37), to define tone (30), to identify a rhetorical device (31), and to interpret the meaning or theme of a part of the text (38, 39).

The statistical analysis for each of these questions provides some interesting information about the students' responses. It tells us not only how many students chose the best answer (thus allowing us to gauge the difficulty of the question for the group) but also how many students chose each of the

four incorrect options. Further, by calculating the average score on the test as a whole for the groups selecting each of the five choices (including the best answer or “key”), the statistics allow us to compare the relative ability levels of each of these five groups of students. It is assumed, for each question, that those who choose the right answer should also do best on the test as a whole (and that was the case for each question on the passage from *The Prelude*). Because we know not only the *number* of students who chose each option, but also their ability level, as established by the whole test, we can see which wrong answer (or “distracter”) was most attractive to groups of students who chose each of the other four options according, in turn, to their performance on the test as a whole. And we can hypothesize as to why the wrong answers were attractive to the groups of varying ability.

- There was a Boy: ye knew him well, ye cliffs
And islands of Winander!—many a time,
At evening, when the earliest stars began
To move along the edges of the hills,*
- (5) *Rising or setting, would he stand alone,
Beneath the trees, or by the glimmering lake;
And there, with fingers interwoven, both hands
Pressed closely palm to palm and to his mouth
Uplifted, he, as through an instrument,*
- (10) *Blew mimic hootings to the silent owls,
That they might answer him.—And they would shout
Across the watery vale, and shout again,
Responsive to his call,—with quivering peals,
And long halloos, and screams, and echoes loud*
- (15) *Redoubled and redoubled; concourse wild
Of jocund din! And, when there came a pause
Of silence such as baffled his best skill:
Then, sometimes, in that silence, while he hung
Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprise*
- (20) *Has carried far into his heart the voice
Of mountain-torrents; or the visible scene
Would enter unawares into his mind,
With all its solemn imagery, its rocks,
Its woods, and that uncertain heaven received
Into the bosom of the steady lake.*

Look, for example, at one of the easiest questions in the set (32), which asks the student to follow the syntax of the blank verse:

32. The phrase "Rising or setting" (line 5) modifies which of the following?

- (A) "evening" (line 3)
- (B) "stars" (line 3)
- (C) "edges" (line 4)
- (D) "hills" (line 4)
- (E) "he" (line 5)

Of the sample of 3,540 students who took the test, 74 percent saw that "rising or setting" modifies "stars," an important point in seeing the scene clearly. But a somewhat less able group of 447 students (13 percent) thought that it was the boy who rises and "sets" (option E) and 57 more, of similar achievement on the test as a whole, saw the edges of the hills in undulating motion (option C). These options were probably chosen because of their proximity to the phrase "rising and setting;" a discussion of both right and wrong answers with students might lead to some consideration of Wordsworth's syntax and the care a modern reader needs to take to construe it correctly. The question tests what seems like a trivial or at least a small point, yet a reader who believes that the boy is constantly sitting down and getting up is perhaps less able to move toward a cogent commentary on the poem than one who sees how the grammar of the sentence functions.

A similar point might be made about question 33 (the easiest in the group):

33. As determined by context, which of the following would best fit between "owls" (line 10) and "That" (line 11)?

- (A) until
- (B) in
- (C) when
- (D) so
- (E) if

This question was missed by those few readers (14 percent) who perhaps failed to see that the *purpose* of the boy's mimicry was to elicit a response from the owls: "Blew mimic hootings to the silent owls / [So] That they might answer him."

A more subjective aspect of the poem is its tone. Question 30 asks students to define the attitude of the speaker toward the boy:

30. The speaker recounts the boy's experiences in the poem with

- (A) mock heroic tones
- (B) resentful disdain
- (C) nostalgic reverence
- (D) gently controlled pity
- (E) faint satiric humor

Seventy-three percent of the students saw that "nostalgic reverence" was the most accurate description available among the five choices. The statistics show us that "resentful disdain" was the choice of the least able students, while the next most able group to those chose the key opted for "mock heroic tones." Perhaps these students saw something faintly silly in the whole exercise of call and response and assumed that Wordsworth did too; or perhaps they misunderstood what is meant by "mock heroic." In any case, a discussion of this item might end with students pointing to the elements in the text that make "nostalgic reverence" the best of these possibilities or, better still, might provoke them to come up with an even more cogent definition of the author's attitude.

Question 34 might help make the often repeated point that the single most important tool in understanding poetry is a dictionary. It asks for a simple paraphrase:

34. Which of the following is the best rendering of the phrase "concourse wild / Of jocund din" (lines 15-16)?

- (A) A deafening clatter of wings
- (B) A tumultuous, loud, gleeful noise
- (C) A painful mixture of sharp sounds
- (D) An aggressive, threatening, vocal attack
- (E) A witty and mocking conversation

Fully 35 percent of the students failed to identify these words as meaning “a tumultuous, loud, gleeful noise.” It might be pointed out to them that “concourse,” “jocund,” and “din” all await the curious reader in a dictionary and that to pass over strange words in ignorance is to shrink a reader’s fundamental task. Having students write questions for their peers, directed, like this one, at a simple paraphrase of the text and including cleverly devised distracters is one way to emphasize this point. (One might note here that the students choosing A, B, and E were all of about equal ability and that, not surprisingly, the option most attractive to the least able students was D, “an aggressive, threatening vocal attack.”) One way to emphasize the importance of a poet’s diction is to look closely at the meaning of individual words in context, as does question 36:

36. In context, “baffled” (line 17) is best interpreted to mean

- (A) defied
- (B) confused
- (C) reflected
- (D) strengthened
- (E) induced

Sixty-nine percent of the students chose “defied” as the best answer, with the lowest-scoring group of students (2 percent) choosing “strengthened,” which is almost the opposite of the correct meaning here.

The following two questions require a reader to follow a pattern of repetition in the poem and to notice how ideas are reinforced in the text:

35. The word “din” (line 16) is most strongly reinforced by which of the following pairs of lines?

- (A) 3 and 4
- (B) 5 and 6
- (C) 9 and 10
- (D) 14 and 15
- (E) 20 and 21

Seventy-five percent of the students correctly chose D; lines 14 and 15 contain “long halloos,” “screams,” and “echoes loud / Redoubled”—all very noisy. The next most attractive options were C (five percent) and E (seven percent), which, sure enough, mention sounds, but not sounds that qualify as a “din.” In a classroom discussion, what might be interesting would be to note how the words “jocund din” summarize and qualify the specific sounds mentioned in lines 13-15.

Question 37, which also requires students to follow the meaning of the text and to see how an idea or image is first stated and then referred to further on, was somewhat easier: 84 percent of the students correctly chose E:

37. The phrase “his best skill” (line 17) is an oblique reference to which of the following?

- (A) “To move along the edges” (line 4)
- (B) “would he stand alone” (line 5)
- (C) “with fingers interwoven” (line 7)
- (D) “as through an instrument” (line 9)
- (E) “Blew mimic hootings” (line 10)

Most (but not all) readers saw that the “skill” referred to here was the speaker’s ability to mimic the owls and to elicit a response from them, the central image upon which the relation between the speaker and nature is based.

The only question in this set calling for the knowledge of technical vocabulary was question 31, which was also one of the most “difficult” in the set:

31. Which shows the rhetorical device of apostrophe?

- (A) “ye knew him well, ye cliffs” (line 1)
- (B) “when the earliest stars began / To move” (lines 3-4)
- (C) “with fingers interwoven” (line 7)
- (D) “they would shout / Across the watery vale” (lines 11-12)
- (E) “the voice / Of mountain-torrents” (lines 20-21)

Only 57 percent of the students had learned that "apostrophe," as a poetical term, is the direct address of a person or thing and thus chose A, in which the speaker seems to speak directly to the cliffs.

The last two questions in the set deal with meaning in the poem. Question 38 was answered correctly by only 31 percent of the students, but that group as a whole had the highest score on the test, as seen in this set of questions:

38. The heaven is "uncertain" (line 24) in the sense that it

- (A) is a reflection that moves
- (B) is of doubtful existence for the speaker
- (C) is a metaphor for fate
- (D) threatens the speaker
- (E) reflects various colors

Although the question focuses on the word "uncertain" in line 24, it really requires the reader to understand that the phrase "received / Into the bosom of the steady lake" (lines 24-25) deals with the reflection of the sky in the water (option A). (The next most able group chose E, which also contains the idea of reflection but is less persuasive because no mention is made in the poem of various colors.) The idea of reflection emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between earth and heaven, between the poet and nature, the way the one flows into the other at certain moments in the Wordsworthian universe, without clear boundary between subject and object. (It was, incidentally, in his description of this particular image that Coleridge said: "Had I met these lines running wild in the deserts of Arabia, I should have instantly screamed out 'Wordsworth!'")

But question 38 points out one of the apparent drawbacks of multiple-choice questions: that readers are asked to choose only one interpretation when several might be argued for. In class, however, starting with one reasonable interpretation (even if others may follow) can help to focus a discussion of the poem. "Uncertain" is an extremely interesting and suggestive word in this context, as is "heaven" for sky. Is the heaven "uncertain" because it is already moving, or, and this is perhaps the more interesting interpretation, because, as a reflection, its very existence has become somewhat tenuous? The "steady lake," like the poet himself, is receptive to

nature, but its possession of heaven is a fragile thing, and, like the poet's own sense of communion with nature, available only at privileged moments like the one described here. If students were asked to write a question focusing on the word "uncertain" or on the image in the final lines of this excerpt, complete with suggested wrong answers, one would have the basis for a classroom discussion that could only lead to a clearer understanding of the poem and to the way in which interpretive readings are formed and defended.


The final question in the set asks students to interpret what has happened to the speaker in the poem:

39. The speaker's experience described in lines 19-25 ("a gentle shock . . . the steady lake") is best characterized as

- (A) a delusion induced by a powerful artist
- (B) a mystical experience resulting from prayer
- (C) a heightened consciousness of the beauty of nature
- (D) an indifference to a force that no longer responds to him
- (E) a growing resentment at his own insignificance

Because different readers may emphasize different aspects of the text, the "best answer" to interpretive questions like this one must be rather general and the "wrong answers" must represent clear misreadings. As a consequence, the question tends to be "easy." Here, 84 percent of the students chose C; none of the other choices can be seriously defended, although 7 percent of the students chose D. In a classroom discussion of such a question, one could, of course, ask the students to defend their interpretations by pointing to elements in the text that support them and one could then move on to deal with the rich suggestiveness of these lines at some length.

I hope that this cursory survey of a few multiple-choice questions has at least suggested that they can be used to stimulate discussion with students. These ten questions on *The Prelude* were not the product of a single person's ingenuity, but reflect the contributions, criticisms and revisions of several writers; they are the result of a joint effort. Questions written by teachers or students and submitted to dissent and discussion in the classroom can only be refined into stronger and more accurate tools of analysis.



In a talk at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association on "The Tests and the Discipline" presented about ten years ago, Paul Smith, then chairman of the English department at Trinity College, said: "I think that a well-constructed set of multiple-choice questions on a literary passage can be a more reliable, more precise, and therefore fairer instrument to test a student's critical abilities than an essay test. I also think that such a set of questions teaches as it tests more often and more effectively than the conventional essay question."

It is the teaching aspect of the multiple-choice format that I have tried to emphasize here. The next step for a student who has worked through, or better yet, devised and discussed a set of multiple-choice questions on a text would be to write an essay on it. That essay will probably be sharper and more cogent for the student's having been obliged to look hard at the text, to define its difficulties, and to acknowledge the limits to objective agreement on specific interpretive points that the text itself presents.