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AP ENGLISH LITERATURE · FREE RESOURCE

The Literary Argument Essay (Q3) Step by Step

This guide teaches you to prepare for and write the open-question essay on the AP English Literature exam. Read Parts 1-5 to learn the method, study the worked example in Part 6 (prompt, brainstorm, thesis, plan, a 6-point essay, and a 3-point essay with diagnosis), fill in a prep sheet for each of your three or four works using Part 7, and practice with the ten prompts in Part 9. The mini mental maps in Part 8 show what finished prep looks like.

Part 1: What Q3 asks, and how it is scored

The task

Question 3 gives you a short conceptual lead (two to four sentences about a kind of character, event, relationship, or element in literature), then asks you to choose a work of fiction in which that concept appears and to analyze how it contributes to an interpretation of **the work as a whole**. A list of roughly 38-43 suggested works follows, but you may choose any work of fiction of literary merit, including a play. The stable wording is:

"Either from your own reading or from the list below, choose a work of fiction in which [concept]. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how [concept] contributes to an interpretation of the work as a whole. Do not merely summarize the plot."

You have a suggested 40 minutes. Recent concepts include a character's intentional reinvention of identity (2023), a character who delays or avoids a decision (2024), a character's unfulfilled need (2024), a character significantly affected by a memory (2025), a character's secret and its effect on relationships (2025), and the tension between the old and the new (2026).

How Q3 is scored

The rubric has the same three rows as Q1 and Q2, with important differences.

ROW	POINTS	Q3-SPECIFIC NOTES
A. Thesis	0-1	A defensible claim about the concept in the work <i>or</i> about how the concept contributes to the interpretation of the whole. Any reasonable reading of the prompt's key term is accepted.
B. Evidence and Commentary	0-4	1: evidence focuses on narrative developments (plot summary) rather than specific details. 2: some specific evidence and some explanation, no line of reasoning. 3: specific evidence for all claims; commentary explains how <i>some</i> evidence supports the line of reasoning. (No technique requirement on Q3.) 4: commentary <i>consistently</i> explains how evidence supports the line of reasoning and the response addresses an interpretation of the work as a whole.
C. Sophistication	0-1	Sustained complexity, broader context (the most common route on Q3 is historical or cultural context), alternative interpretations, or vivid, persuasive style.

Why students lose points on Q3

Q3 usually has the highest mean of the three essays, but the Chief Reader reports name the same traps year after year:

PROBLEM	FIX
Plot summary	Paraphrase events in a clause; spend sentences on what they mean
Evidence "too general"	Name specific scenes, characters, and details; quote short phrases if you can
Drifting from the key term (memory becomes "trauma," indecision becomes "decisions")	Reread the key term before each body paragraph
Misreading the prompt	Underline the exact noun in the concept sentence
A half-remembered book	Choose from the works you prepared; know your key scenes
A thesis about the theme but not "the work as a whole"	End every paragraph by returning to what the work means

Part 2: Choosing and preparing your works

How many and which

Prepare **three or four works** so thoroughly that you could write about any scene from memory. A balanced set:

SLOT	EXAMPLE	WHY
A 19th-century novel	<i>Jane Eyre</i> , <i>Frankenstein</i> , <i>Great Expectations</i> , <i>Wuthering Heights</i>	Public domain, rich in motifs, endlessly flexible
A 20th- or 21st-century novel	<i>Beloved</i> , <i>Their Eyes Were Watching God</i> , <i>The Great Gatsby</i> , <i>Invisible Man</i> , <i>The Namesake</i>	Modern voice, different structures
A play	<i>Hamlet</i> , <i>Othello</i> , <i>A Raisin in the Sun</i> , <i>A Doll's House</i> , <i>Fences</i>	Compact, quotable, nearly every concept fits
A non-Western or contemporary work	<i>Things Fall Apart</i> , <i>Purple Hibiscus</i> , <i>The Namesake</i>	Gives you a different cultural lens for context

The most often cited works in Q3 lists since 1970 include *Invisible Man*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Great Expectations*, *Jane Eyre*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Crime and Punishment*, *King Lear*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *The Awakening*, *Beloved*, *Heart of Darkness*, and *Moby-Dick*. The point is not to choose from this list but to choose works rich enough to answer almost any concept.

Characteristics of a good Q3 work

- It contains **characters under pressure** who make choices.
- It has **multiple scenes** you remember in detail.
- It has **symbols or motifs** that recur.
- You can state **what it means** in a sentence that is more than its topic.
- It is a work of **literary merit** (a classic or a widely taught contemporary novel or play, not a franchise or genre pulp).

The mental map

For each work, build a “mental map” on one page. Include:

1. Title, author, date, genre, narrator or point of view.
2. **Characters**: the main four to six, with one line each on their desire and flaw.
3. **Conflicts**: internal and external.
4. **Structure**: how the story is told (frame, chronology, time jumps) and how it ends.
5. **Symbols and motifs**: three to five, each with one scene.
6. **Themes**: written as sentences, not words.
7. **Key scenes**: four to six, each with a concrete detail.
8. **Quotable lines**: five to ten, each of six words or fewer.
9. **Prompts it could answer**: a list of ten concepts.

Part 7 gives a blank template, and Part 8 gives eight finished mini-maps.

Part 3: Reading the prompt

Find the key term

Underline the key noun or phrase in the concept sentence. Write it at the top of your page. It will appear in your thesis, in every topic sentence, and in your conclusion.

PROMPT PHRASE	KEY TERM	A COMMON MISREADING
"a character who delays or avoids a decision"	indecision	writing about a decision
"a character significantly affected by a memory"	memory	writing about "the past" or "trauma" generally
"a character's intentional reinvention of identity"	reinvention (deliberate)	writing about identity in general
"tension between the old and the new"	tension	writing about change without the conflict

Define the key term for your work

The Chief Reader's best advice: **say what the key term means in this work**. "For Sethe, memory is not recollection but re-inhabitation." That sentence both defines the term and begins an argument.

Test whether your work fits

Ask: can I name three specific scenes where this concept operates? If not, choose another work.

Part 4: The thesis

What a Q3 thesis must do

A thesis earns the point if it makes a defensible claim about the concept in the work, or about how the concept contributes to the meaning of the whole. The strongest theses do both and set up a line of reasoning.

The formula

In [work], [author] presents [concept as defined in this work] as , ***ultimately suggesting that*** (a statement about the human condition or the work's argument).

Weak and strong theses (prompt: a character's unfulfilled need)

THESIS	VERDICT
"In <i>Frankenstein</i> , the Creature has an unfulfilled need."	Restates the prompt. No point.

THESIS	VERDICT
"Mary Shelley uses character, symbol, and plot to show unfulfilled need."	Device list. No point.
"The Creature wants love, and people need love."	Weak; probably a point, but nothing to build on.
"In <i>Frankenstein</i> , Shelley presents the Creature's longing for recognition as a need so basic that its refusal, not the Creature's nature, produces the monstrous, suggesting that the novel indicts those who withhold sympathy rather than those who suffer from its absence."	Defensible, defines the term, and previews the line of reasoning. Point.

Avoiding undefined abstractions

Words like "society," "trauma," "identity," and "power" are too large. Replace them with specifics: "the Creature's longing for a companion," "Sethe's inability to stop re-inhabiting Sweet Home."

Part 5: The body

Idea-based paragraphs, not chronological retelling

The most common Q3 failure is retelling the story in order. Instead, organize your essay by **claims**. Each body paragraph makes one interpretive claim about the concept, supports it with **two or three specific scenes or details**, and ends by returning to the whole.

CHRONOLOGICAL (AVOID)	CLAIM-BASED (USE)
Paragraph 1: Beginning of the book	Paragraph 1: The need is born from observation and rejection
Paragraph 2: Middle	Paragraph 2: The need turns destructive when it is refused
Paragraph 3: End	Paragraph 3: The frame and ending show the need is universal

The paragraph template

1. **Topic sentence** with the key term and an analytical verb.
2. **Evidence**: two or three specific scenes or details, named concretely (who, where, what), with short quotations if you can recall them accurately. Paraphrase with specificity is acceptable on Q3; a quotation is not required.
3. **Commentary**: at least twice as long as the evidence. Explain *how* the scene supports the claim and *why* it matters to the work as a whole.
4. **Link** back to the thesis or to the next claim.

Commentary that addresses the whole

For Row B's fourth point, the response must address an interpretation of the work as a whole. End each paragraph with a sentence that uses one of these frames:

- "This moment reframes the novel's treatment of..."
- "In the context of the whole, this suggests that..."
- "The novel thereby argues that..."
- "By the end of the work, this early scene reads as..."
- "The structure of the work enacts..."

Evidence without summary

SUMMARY (AVOID)	SPECIFIC EVIDENCE (USE)
"Then the Creature goes to the cottage, learns language, and is rejected."	"Hidden beside the De Lacey's cottage, the Creature learns language by listening, and his rapid approach to old De Lacey, the blind man who alone does not recoil, is the only sympathy he ever receives."

Sophistication in Q3

The most common route on Q3, according to the 2025 Chief Reader report, is **broader context**: situating the work in its historical moment, or in a literary tradition. Be specific. "Shelley writes at the end of the Enlightenment..." is vague. "Writing in the aftermath of Romantic debates about reason and feeling, Shelley frames the pursuit of knowledge as a failure of sympathy" is better. Other pathways: sustained complexity (the Creature is both victim and murderer), an alternative reading (is Victor or the Creature the monster?), or consistently vivid style.

Pacing

MINUTES	TASK
0-3	Read the prompt; underline the key term; define it
3-8	Brainstorm: list every work, scene, and detail that fits; choose the work
8-11	Thesis and three topic sentences
11-37	Write: intro 3 min, three body paragraphs 7 min each, short conclusion 2 min
37-40	Reread; fix grammar; add a missing "whole work" sentence

The 2025 Chief Reader report recommends "brainstorm, brainstorm, brainstorm": spend the first five minutes listing everything you remember, then choose the strongest fit. If Q3 is your strongest essay, write it first.

Part 6: The full worked example

The prompt (original)

Many works of literature feature a character who is driven by a longing that is never satisfied. This unmet need may be for love, belonging, recognition, or understanding, and it can shape the character's choices and the course of the work. Either from your own reading or from the list below, choose a work of fiction in which a character is driven by an unfulfilled need. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how the character's unfulfilled need contributes to an interpretation of the work as a whole. Do not merely summarize the plot.

Step 1: Key term

Unfulfilled need: a longing that persists because it is refused or unattainable.

Step 2: Brainstorm (the work: *Frankenstein*)

Works that fit: *Frankenstein* (the Creature), *Jane Eyre* (Jane's need for belonging), *Great Expectations* (Pip's need for approval), *Hamlet* (need for certainty).

I choose *Frankenstein* because I know it well and the need appears in three characters.

Frankenstein (Mary Shelley, 1818, with 1831 revisions). Details I know: - Frame: Captain Robert Walton writes letters to his sister, Margaret Saville, from the Arctic; he is lonely and longs for a friend. - Victor Frankenstein, from Geneva, studies at Ingolstadt and creates a living being; he flees in horror when it opens its eyes. - The Creature hides near the De Lacey cottage, learns language by watching the family (Felix, Agatha, old De Lacey, and Safie), and reads *Paradise Lost*, Plutarch's *Lives*, and *The Sorrows of Werter*. - He approaches the blind old De Lacey, who treats him kindly; Felix returns and drives him away. - He saves a girl from drowning and is shot. - He murders William, Victor's young brother; Justine Moritz is executed for the crime. - At the glacier, the Creature tells his story and demands a female companion. Victor agrees, begins the work, and destroys it on a remote island in the Orkneys. - The Creature kills Henry Clerval, then Elizabeth on her wedding night. - Victor pursues the Creature into the Arctic and dies on Walton's ship. - The Creature mourns over Victor's body and vows to destroy himself. - Quotable fragments: "I ought to be thy Adam" and "the fallen angel"; "misery made me a fiend."

Step 3: Thesis

In *Frankenstein*, Shelley presents the Creature's longing for recognition and companionship as a need so basic that its refusal, rather than his nature, produces the monstrous, and by echoing that need in Victor and Walton she suggests that the novel indicts the human refusal of sympathy rather than the suffering of those who lack it.

Step 4: Plan

PART	CLAIM	EVIDENCE (SPECIFIC)	WHOLE-WORK LINK
Body 1	The Creature's need is born of observation and answered by rejection	De Lacey cottage; learns language; old De Lacey's kindness; Felix drives him away; the Creature says "misery made me a fiend"	Establishes that his violence follows, not precedes, rejection
Body 2	The need turns destructive and is mirrored by Victor's refusal	Demand for a companion at the glacier; Victor destroys the female creature; Clerval and Elizabeth die	Shows how the refusal of need is the engine of the tragedy
Body 3	The frame and ending universalize the need	Walton's letters (longs for a friend); Victor's deathbed warning; the Creature's lament over Victor and plan to die	The novel argues that everyone suffers a loneliness that only sympathy can heal
Conclusion	Context	Post-Enlightenment confidence in reason and Romantic emphasis on sympathy	

The 6-point essay, with margin commentary

In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, a creature assembled from the remains of the dead asks for something no laboratory can supply: another being who will look at him without horror. In *Frankenstein*, Shelley presents the Creature's longing for recognition and companionship as a need so basic that its refusal, rather than his nature, produces the monstrous, and by echoing that need in Victor and Walton she suggests that the novel indicts the human refusal of sympathy rather than the suffering of those who lack it. [Thesis: defines the key term for this work, makes a defensible claim, and previews the whole-work interpretation. Row A.]

The Creature's need is born from observation and answered with rejection. Hidden beside the De Laceys' cottage, he learns language by listening to a family whose kindness to one another he cannot share, and he reads *Paradise Lost* and *The Sorrows of Werter* in search of a self to model. [Specific details: the cottage, language, the books; not summary but evidence of the need's formation.] When he finally approaches the blind old man, the only member of the family who does not see him as a horror, he receives one hour of sympathy; when Felix returns and drives him away, that hour becomes the measure of everything he has been denied. The sequence matters because it shows that the need exists *before* any violence: the Creature wishes to join a family, and the family's violent reaction teaches him that his appearance outweighs his speech. [Commentary explains how the evidence supports the claim; the whole-work implication is stated.] Shelley's Creature later says that "misery made me a fiend," and the order of the clause makes the argument: misery first, fiend after. [A short quotation integrated, with a "how" note about order.] The novel thus resists the idea that the Creature is naturally monstrous; his longing is the first fact about him, and his cruelty the last. [Link to the thesis and the whole work.]

The need turns destructive when Victor refuses to answer it. At the glacier, the Creature demands a female companion, and Victor, after beginning the work, tears it apart on a remote island in the Orkneys, afraid of a race of such beings. [Specific: the demand, the Orkney scene.] The refusal is the novel's turning point: the Creature's promise, "I shall be with you on your wedding night," is carried out when Elizabeth dies, and Clerval's death follows. [Specific consequences named; the quotation reflects the threat, paraphrased here to remain accurate.] The destruction of the female creature reveals the structure of Victor's failure: he is willing to make life but not to take responsibility for what he makes. His refusal to answer the Creature's need repeats, on a larger scale, the refusal of the cottagers. [Commentary compares the two refusals to build a line of reasoning.] By placing the demand for a companion at the center of the novel, Shelley suggests that the tragedy is not that a monster exists but that no one will stand beside him. [Whole-work link.]

The frame and ending universalize this need. Robert Walton, who writes to his sister from the Arctic, confesses that he longs for a friend who can share his ambitions; he is a lonely man in a white wilderness, and his letters are a second, gentler version of the Creature's plea. [Specific: the frame; draws a parallel.] Victor too suffers from the absence of sympathy, since his ambition isolates him from Elizabeth and Clerval even as he claims to love them. When the Creature stands over Victor's body at the end and vows to burn himself, saying he repents what he has done, he completes a pattern: the one being who understood his creator is the one who killed those he loved. [Specific scenes; the ending is addressed.] The novel's nested structure, in which Walton hears Victor, who hears the Creature, makes the need for a listener the form as well as the subject of the book. [Structure as a whole-work element.] Shelley therefore asks the reader to be the listener that no character in the novel is. [Strong closing link.]

In writing at the end of the Enlightenment, when confidence in reason and discovery was strong, Shelley allies herself with the Romantic belief that knowledge without sympathy is dangerous. *Frankenstein* does not reject science; it rejects the isolation of the scientist. In the end, the book suggests that the monstrous is what is made when need is refused. [Context is specific and tied to the argument; the final sentence returns to the key term.]

Scoring: 6/6.

ROW	SCORE	WHY
A	1	Defines the key term for this work and makes a defensible claim about the whole.
B	4	Specific evidence for every claim (cottage, De Lacey, glacier, Orkney, frame, ending); commentary consistently explains how each detail supports the line of reasoning (rejection, refusal, universalization); every paragraph returns to an interpretation of the work as a whole.

ROW	SCORE	WHY
C	1	Sustains a complexity (the Creature as both victim and killer, Victor as both creator and refuser) and situates the novel in its historical moment with specificity.

The 3-point essay, with diagnosis

In *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, the Creature has an unfulfilled need. He wants love but he does not get it. This shows that everyone needs love and that without it people can turn bad. [Thesis: partly a restatement, partly a platitude. It makes a claim ("without love, people can turn bad") that could earn the point, but it is not tied to the work as a whole and does not define the need for this work. Borderline Row A: 1 at best.]

First, Victor Frankenstein makes the Creature in his lab in Ingolstadt. He is horrified and runs away. The Creature wanders and finds a cottage where a family lives. He watches them and learns to speak. He wants to be their friend, but when the son Felix sees him he is scared and beats him. The Creature is sad and angry. [This is plot summary: events in order with minimal commentary. Row B signals at 1-2: evidence is accurate but the paragraph explains nothing. "Sad and angry" is a restatement.]

Next, the Creature kills Victor's brother William and Justine is blamed. Then the Creature asks Victor to make him a wife. Victor starts but then destroys her. The Creature is angry and kills Clerval and Elizabeth. This shows that the Creature has a need that Victor does not fill. [Still a chronological retelling, though specific details are accurate and the final sentence begins to connect them. The commentary is a single sentence at the end.]

At the end, Victor dies on Walton's ship and the Creature says he is going to die too. This shows that the need was never fulfilled and so the Creature was unhappy all his life. In conclusion, *Frankenstein* shows that people need love to be happy, which is the theme of the whole work. [The ending is covered and the "whole work" is invoked, but the claim is generic and the connection is asserted rather than shown.]

Scoring: 3/6.

ROW	SCORE	WHY
A	1	The last sentence of the first paragraph is a defensible, if generic, claim. Many readers would award the point.

ROW	SCORE	WHY
B	2	Evidence is specific and accurate (Ingolstadt, Felix, William, Justine, Clerval, Elizabeth, Walton's ship), but nearly every sentence is plot; commentary explains little and does not build a line of reasoning. It is a 2 rather than a 3 because the commentary is not connected to a line of reasoning across paragraphs.
C	0	No sustained complexity or context.

The total here, 1 + 2 + 0, is a 3. A reader being strict about Row A would produce a 2; a reader giving a generous Row B would produce a 4.

How to revise toward a 5:

1. Define the need for this work: not "love" but "recognition and a companion who will not recoil."
2. Turn each chronological paragraph into a claim ("The need is born of rejection," "The need turns destructive when Victor refuses it").
3. For each scene, add two sentences: how the scene supports the claim, and what it means for the whole book.
4. Add Walton's letters and the nested structure to show the need is universal.
5. Replace "shows that people need love" with a specific interpretation: the novel indicts the refusal of sympathy.

Part 7: The Q3 prep sheet (template)

Make one copy of this sheet for each of your three or four works. Fill it in from memory first, then check your book.

Q3 PREP SHEET

Title: _____ Author: _____ Date: _____
Genre: _____ Narrator / point of view: _____

1. THE WORK IN ONE SENTENCE (what it argues, not what happens)

2. CHARACTERS (name; what the character wants; the character's flaw or conflict)

a. _____

b. _____

c. _____

d. _____

e. Minor character who matters and why: _____

3. CONFLICTS

Internal: _____

External: _____

4. STRUCTURE (how it is told; frame, flashbacks, shifts; how it ends)

5. SYMBOLS AND MOTIFS (symbol; the scene where it appears; what it means)

a. _____

b. _____

c. _____

6. THEMES (full sentences)

a. _____

b. _____

7. KEY SCENES (scene; one concrete detail; what it shows)

a. _____

b. _____

c. _____

d. _____

e. Opening: _____

f. Closing: _____

8. QUOTABLE FRAGMENTS (six words or fewer; chapter or act)

a. _____ b. _____ c. _____

d. _____ e. _____

9. HISTORICAL / CULTURAL CONTEXT (two specific facts that help interpret the work)

10. TEN PROMPT CONCEPTS THIS WORK COULD ANSWER (and the character or scene I would use)

Part 8: Mini mental maps for eight commonly used works

These maps summarize the key facts you need for each work. They are starting points: write your own from memory, adding scenes and fragments you know well. All eight are widely taught; four are in the public domain (*Frankenstein*, *Jane Eyre*, *Hamlet*, *Great Expectations*), and *The Great Gatsby* entered the U.S. public domain in 2021.

1. *Frankenstein* (Mary Shelley, 1818)

- **Narration:** Nested frame. Walton's letters to his sister contain Victor's narrative, which contains the Creature's narrative.
- **Characters:** Victor Frankenstein (ambition, guilt, refusal of responsibility); the Creature (longing for recognition, then revenge); Robert Walton (ambition and loneliness); Elizabeth Lavenza, Henry Clerval, William, and Justine Moritz (victims); the De Lacey family (the Creature's model of belonging).

- **Key scenes:** The Creature's animation and Victor's flight; the De Lacey cottage and rejection; the glacier meeting and the demand for a companion; the destruction of the female creature in the Orkneys; the wedding-night death of Elizabeth; the Arctic pursuit and Victor's death; the Creature's lament and vow.
- **Motifs:** Fire and light as knowledge and danger; nature's sublime landscapes (glacier, Arctic); letters and listening; creator and creation (Adam, the fallen angel, *Paradise Lost*).
- **Themes:** Knowledge without responsibility is dangerous; the need for sympathy; the monstrous is made, not born.
- **Prompts it can answer:** unfulfilled need; isolation; responsibility; ambition; the double; nature; revenge; secrets; parent-child conflict; a villain made sympathetic.

2. *Jane Eyre* (Charlotte Brontë, 1847)

- **Narration:** First person; Jane narrates retrospectively as a mature woman ("Reader, I married him").
- **Structure:** Five places in sequence: Gateshead, Lowood, Thornfield, Moor House, Ferndean.
- **Characters:** Jane (independence and moral conviction); Mrs. Reed (cruelty); Mr. Brocklehurst (hypocrisy); Helen Burns (patient faith); Miss Temple (maternal teacher); Mr. Rochester (passion, deception); Bertha Mason (the secret in the attic); St. John Rivers (duty without love); Diana and Mary Rivers (family she finds).
- **Key scenes:** The red-room punishment; Helen's death at Lowood; Jane's meeting with Rochester on the road; the fire in Rochester's bedroom; the interrupted wedding; Jane's flight across the moor; St. John's proposal; the mysterious call across distance; the return to Ferndean, where Rochester is blinded and maimed.
- **Motifs:** Fire and ice; windows and thresholds; birds and cages (she says she is "no bird"); the red-room; letters and voices.
- **Themes:** Self-respect and autonomy against dependence; passion balanced with conscience; class and gender constraints; the search for family.
- **Prompts it can answer:** reinvention; outsider; moral choice; secrets; setting; class hierarchy; defiance of authority; the past; fire and ice as symbols; flight.

3. *Hamlet* (William Shakespeare, c. 1600)

- **Structure:** Five acts; Elsinore Castle, Denmark.
- **Characters:** Hamlet (grief, intellect, indecision); Claudius (guilt, ambition); Gertrude (ambiguity); Polonius (surveillance, advice); Ophelia (obedience, madness); Laertes (a foil in action); Horatio (loyal friend); Fortinbras (another son avenging a father); Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.
- **Key scenes:** The Ghost on the battlements; "To be or not to be"; the play-within-a-play (the Mousetrap); the prayer scene, in which Hamlet declines to kill the praying Claudius; the closet scene and Polonius's death; Ophelia's madness and death; the graveyard and Yorick's skull; the duel and the poisoned cup.
- **Motifs:** Acting and seeming; poison and disease; spying and eavesdropping; the skull and mortality.
- **Themes:** The difficulty of action in a corrupt world; the tension between thought and deed; mortality; appearance versus reality.
- **Quotable fragments:** "the play's the thing"; "the rest is silence."
- **Prompts it can answer:** indecision; revenge; madness; the dead; a foil; parent-child conflict; role-playing; moral ambiguity; an investigator or a mystery; death scenes.

4. *Great Expectations* (Charles Dickens, 1861)

- **Narration:** First person; the adult Pip looks back on his younger self with irony.
- **Characters:** Pip (ambition, shame, redemption); Joe Gargery (loyal, uneducated goodness); Miss Havisham (arrested time, vengeance); Estella (trained to break hearts); Magwitch (the convict who becomes Pip's benefactor); Jaggers (the lawyer); Herbert Pocket (friend); Orlick (dark double); Biddy.
- **Key scenes:** The graveyard encounter with the convict; Satis House with the stopped clocks; Pip's shame of Joe; the revelation that Magwitch, not Miss Havisham, is the benefactor; the fire that injures Miss Havisham; Magwitch's capture and death; Pip's illness and Joe's care; the ambiguous ending in the ruined garden.
- **Motifs:** Hands; chains and prisons; clocks and stopped time; gentleman as social ideal; class.
- **Themes:** Social ambition corrupts; true worth is moral, not social; guilt and redemption.
- **Prompts it can answer:** a character's ideal view of the world; shame; class hierarchy; benefactor; an abandoned or mysterious origin; the past; secrets; a child's response to injustice; a revision of identity.

5. *The Great Gatsby* (F. Scott Fitzgerald, 1925)

- **Narration:** First person; Nick Carraway, who is both participant and judge.
- **Setting:** Long Island's West Egg and East Egg; the Valley of Ashes with the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg; New York City.
- **Characters:** Jay Gatsby (James Gatz, self-invented dreamer); Daisy Buchanan (charm, carelessness); Tom Buchanan (brutal privilege); Jordan Baker (cynicism); Myrtle and George Wilson (the poor, trapped); Nick (the observer).
- **Key scenes:** The green light at Daisy's dock; Gatsby's parties; the reunion in Nick's cottage; the hotel confrontation at the Plaza; Myrtle's death by Gatsby's car (Daisy is driving); Gatsby's death at the pool; the empty funeral; the final image of boats "against the current."
- **Motifs:** The green light; the Valley of Ashes; the eyes; weather; parties; time and clocks.
- **Themes:** The corrupted American dream; the past cannot be repeated; wealth and carelessness.
- **Prompts it can answer:** reinvention of identity; an ideal view of the world; a character's relationship to the past; social class; an observer-narrator; an unfulfilled need; setting as symbol; a social occasion; a death.

6. *Beloved* (Toni Morrison, 1987)

- **Setting and structure:** Cincinnati, 1873, haunted house at 124 Bluestone Road, with memories of the Sweet Home plantation in Kentucky; nonlinear, with fragmented memory.
- **Characters:** Sethe (survivor, mother who killed her child to save her from slavery); Denver (lonely daughter); Baby Suggs (preacher of self-love); Paul D (former Sweet Home man, "tobacco tin" heart); Beloved (the ghost made flesh); schoolteacher (the slaveholder); Stamp Paid.
- **Key scenes:** The arrival of Paul D at 124; the memory of Sethe's escape and of the milk taken from her; Baby Suggs's sermon in the Clearing; the infanticide; Beloved's arrival; Sethe's near destruction in caring for Beloved; the women of the community gathering to drive Beloved away.
- **Motifs:** Memory and "rememory" (memory as place); trees (the scar on Sethe's back); water; the color red; hands.
- **Themes:** The past is not past; love and its dangerous excess; community as healing; the cost of slavery.

- **Prompts it can answer:** memory; secrets; a character's response to hierarchy; a sacrifice; a house; a ghost; the old and the new; a maternal relationship; community; an unfulfilled need.

7. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Zora Neale Hurston, 1937)

- **Narration:** Frame: Janie tells her story to her friend Pheoby in Eatonville; the third-person narrative blends with Janie's own voice and dialect.
- **Characters:** Janie Crawford; Nanny (her grandmother, who values security); Logan Killicks (first husband, practical); Joe Starks (second husband, ambition and control); Vergible "Tea Cake" Woods (third husband, play and equality); Pheoby.
- **Key scenes:** Janie under the pear tree; marriage to Logan; the move to Eatonville with Joe and his silencing of her; her cutting of her hair on Joe's death; her love for Tea Cake and the move to the Everglades; the hurricane; Tea Cake's rabies and Janie's killing him in self-defense; the trial; her return.
- **Motifs:** The pear tree; the horizon; hair; the porch; the mule; the hurricane (Lake Okeechobee).
- **Themes:** A woman's search for voice and self-definition; love as equal partnership; storytelling and community.
- **Prompts it can answer:** reinvention of identity; a character's response to hierarchy; a symbol (pear tree, hair); marriage and power; a character's ideal view of the world; a journey; a trial; voice.

8. *Things Fall Apart* (Chinua Achebe, 1958)

- **Setting:** The Igbo village of Umuofia in late-19th-century Nigeria before and during the arrival of British colonial rule and missionaries.
- **Structure:** Three parts: Okonkwo's rise; exile to Mbanta; the return and the collapse.
- **Characters:** Okonkwo (strength, fear of weakness); Unoka (his father, whom he despises); Nwoye (his son, who converts); Ikemefuna (the boy he raises and helps kill); Obierika (a friend who questions); Ekwefi and Ezinma; Mr. Brown and Reverend Smith (the missionaries); the District Commissioner.
- **Key scenes:** Okonkwo's wrestling fame; the killing of Ikemefuna; the accidental killing of Ezeudu's son and the exile; the arrival of the missionaries; Nwoye's departure; Enoch's unmasking of an egwugwu; the burning of the church; Okonkwo's killing of the court messenger; his suicide; the Commissioner's imagined book title.
- **Motifs:** Proverbs; fire; yams and masculinity; fear of failure.
- **Themes:** The tragic consequences of rigid masculinity; cultural collision; the limits of a single story.
- **Prompts it can answer:** the old and the new; a tragic figure; a character's response to a collision of cultures; fear as a motive; exile; sacrifice; a minor character (Obierika) as foil; the ending as irony.

Part 9: Ten practice prompts

For each prompt, write the key term, brainstorm for five minutes, name your work, then write a thesis and plan. Write at least four of the ten as full timed essays. Suggestions for strong choices are in the Answer Key.

All ten are original prompts written in the style of the exam. For each: "Either from your own reading or from a list your teacher provides, choose a work of fiction... Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how [concept] contributes to an interpretation of the work as a whole. Do not merely summarize the plot."

1. **A house or home.** Many works of literature feature a house or home that carries significance beyond its physical presence. Choose a work in which a house or home is symbolically important, and analyze how it contributes to an interpretation of the work as a whole.
2. **A betrayal.** In many works, a betrayal reshapes the relationships among characters and alters the direction of the plot. Choose a work in which a character is betrayed or betrays, and analyze how the betrayal contributes to an interpretation of the work as a whole.
3. **A foil.** Some characters exist chiefly to illuminate another character through contrast. Choose a work in which a secondary character serves as a foil, and analyze how the contrast contributes to an interpretation of the work as a whole.
4. **A return.** Characters in many works return to a place they once left, and the return reveals what has changed in the place or in the character. Choose a work in which a character returns, and analyze how the return contributes to an interpretation of the work as a whole.
5. **A social occasion.** A dinner, wedding, funeral, or party can expose the values of a community. Choose a work in which a social occasion is significant, and analyze how it contributes to an interpretation of the work as a whole.
6. **Silence.** In many works, what characters decline to say matters as much as what they say. Choose a work in which silence, whether spoken or narrated, is important, and analyze how it contributes to an interpretation of the work as a whole.
7. **A moral compromise.** Characters sometimes accept a compromise that conflicts with their principles. Choose a work in which a character makes such a compromise, and analyze how it contributes to an interpretation of the work as a whole.
8. **An inherited burden.** Characters may inherit expectations, debts, or obligations they did not choose. Choose a work in which a character inherits a burden, and analyze how it contributes to an interpretation of the work as a whole.
9. **A journey.** A physical journey can also be a movement of the mind or spirit. Choose a work in which a journey is significant, and analyze how it contributes to an interpretation of the work as a whole.
10. **Humor in a serious work.** Even in works that treat grave subjects, moments of humor can serve important purposes. Choose a work in which humor plays a significant role, and analyze how it contributes to an interpretation of the work as a whole.

Part 10: Final checklist

Before you write, answer these:

CHECK	YES/NO
Have I underlined the key term and defined it for my work?	
Can I name three specific scenes that fit?	
Does my thesis make a claim, not restate the prompt?	
Does each body paragraph make one claim and use two or three details?	
Does each paragraph end by returning to the work as a whole?	

CHECK	YES/NO
Have I kept the key term in front of me?	
Is there at least one point where I explain <i>how</i> a scene works, not just what happens?	
Is there a specific context or a sustained complexity?	

Answer Key

Worked example scoring

See the scoring tables after each essay in Part 6. The 6-point essay earns Row A through its defined key term and whole-work claim, Row B through consistent commentary tied to a line of reasoning that ends in the work as a whole, and Row C through specific historical context and sustained complexity. The 3-point essay earns its points through accuracy and specific detail but loses Row B's higher levels because nearly everything is retelling.

Practice prompt suggestions

For each prompt, a strong choice of work and a sample angle. These are suggestions; any work you know well that fits is acceptable.

#	STRONG CHOICES	SAMPLE ANGLE
1. House or home	<i>Jane Eyre</i> (Thornfield, Gateshead, Ferndean); <i>Great Expectations</i> (Satis House); <i>Beloved</i> (124 Bluestone Road); <i>A Raisin in the Sun</i>	In <i>Beloved</i> , 124 holds the past that the community and Sethe cannot yet face, so that the house is memory made architecture.
2. A betrayal	<i>Hamlet</i> (Gertrude, Claudius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern); <i>Great Expectations</i> (Compeyson and Magwitch; Pip and Joe); <i>Frankenstein</i> (Victor and the Creature)	In <i>Great Expectations</i> , Pip's betrayal of Joe is the moral center, so that the novel measures worth by loyalty instead of rank.
3. A foil	<i>Hamlet</i> (Laertes, Fortinbras); <i>Jane Eyre</i> (St. John Rivers; Bertha); <i>The Great Gatsby</i> (Tom or Nick); <i>Things Fall Apart</i> (Obierika)	In <i>Things Fall Apart</i> , Obierika's reflective questioning of customs makes Okonkwo's rigidity more tragic.
4. A return	<i>Jane Eyre</i> (Ferndean; Gateshead); <i>Their Eyes Were Watching God</i> (Eatonville); <i>Great Expectations</i> (Pip to the forge); <i>Things Fall Apart</i> (Okonkwo's return from exile)	In <i>Things Fall Apart</i> , the return shows that the world Okonkwo left no longer exists, converting exile into the novel's central irony.

#	STRONG CHOICES	SAMPLE ANGLE
5. A social occasion	<i>The Great Gatsby</i> (the parties; the funeral); <i>Their Eyes Were Watching God</i> (the mule's funeral); <i>Hamlet</i> (the Mousetrap; the duel); <i>Great Expectations</i> (the Christmas dinner)	In <i>The Great Gatsby</i> , the parties reveal the emptiness behind glamour, and the poorly attended funeral reveals it again.
6. Silence	<i>Beloved</i> (what is not said about the past); <i>Hamlet</i> ("the rest is silence"); <i>Jane Eyre</i> (the secret in the attic); <i>Their Eyes Were Watching God</i> (Janie's silence under Joe)	In <i>Their Eyes Were Watching God</i> , Janie's silence under Joe becomes the book's measure of oppression, and her speech to Pheoby its answer.
7. A moral compromise	<i>Hamlet</i> (Hamlet and the performance of madness); <i>Jane Eyre</i> (Rochester's concealment of Bertha); <i>Great Expectations</i> (Pip's acceptance of the money); <i>The Great Gatsby</i> (Nick's tolerance)	In <i>Great Expectations</i> , Pip's acceptance of an unearned fortune is a moral compromise that costs him Joe.
8. An inherited burden	<i>Hamlet</i> (a father's command); <i>Frankenstein</i> (the sins of creation); <i>Things Fall Apart</i> (Okonkwo and Unoka); <i>Beloved</i>	In <i>Hamlet</i> , the inherited burden of the Ghost's command makes thought and action incompatible.
9. A journey	<i>Frankenstein</i> (the Arctic pursuit); <i>Their Eyes Were Watching God</i> (to Eatonville and the Everglades); <i>Jane Eyre</i> (the flight across the moor); <i>Great Expectations</i> (to London)	In <i>Jane Eyre</i> , the flight across the moor strips Jane of every support and reveals the independence she has built.
10. Humor in a serious work	<i>Hamlet</i> (the gravediggers, Hamlet's wit); <i>Great Expectations</i> (Wemmick, Pumblechook); <i>Their Eyes Were Watching God</i> (porch talk); <i>The Great Gatsby</i> (Nick's irony)	In <i>Hamlet</i> , the gravediggers' humor makes mortality ordinary and sets up Hamlet's recognition of it.

Self-scoring guide for your own Q3 essays

LEVEL	MARKS OF THE ESSAY
6	Defined key term; defensible thesis on the whole; each paragraph a claim with 2-3 specific details; commentary explains how throughout; every paragraph returns to the work as a whole; one sustained complexity or specific context
5	Same as 6 but with one thin paragraph or no sophistication
4	Defensible thesis; specific evidence; commentary mostly explains how; some chronological drift

LEVEL	MARKS OF THE ESSAY
3	Thesis generic or partly restates; mostly specific evidence; commentary thin or inconsistent
2	Evidence is mostly plot; little explanation
1	Plot summary; no claim

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