

Grade 12: AP Literature and Composition Summer Reading Thought Questions

A GOOD MAN IS HARD TO FIND by Flannery O'Connor

1. O'Connor's Catholic faith serves as the moral foundation for many of her stories. Explain the thematic significance of religion in such stories as "The Displaced Person" and "A Good Man is Hard to Find."
2. Explain how the use of irony, realistic details, and regionalism of character, dialogue, and setting serve as important elements in "Good Country People," "The River," and "A Late Encounter with the Enemy."
3. Regarding her craft, Flannery O'Connor once wrote:

"You have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large startling figures."

Explain how this view informs the reader's understanding of character as it reveals itself in the extreme and grotesque situations portrayed in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" and "Good Country People."

1. O'Connor's portrayal of evil as a powerful, ever-present, destructive, and often mindless force in the world serves as a recurring theme. Explain how this is true in such stories as "The Displaced Person," "Good Country People," and "A Good Man is Hard to Find."
2. Explain how O'Connor's use of religious metaphors and allusions contribute to the theme of redemptive mercy in "An Artificial Nigger."
3. The concise and swift narrative style which O'Connor employs in constructing her characters contributes to the thematic "shock of evil" in many of her stories. Explain how this is true in such stories as "The Life You Save May Your Own" and "The River."

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CRIME AND PUNISHMENT **by Fyodor Dostoevsky**

1. Analyze the character of Raskolnikov. What are his primary personality traits—virtues, flaws, contradictions? What motivates him to act?
2. How does Dostoevsky reveal Raskolnikov’s character? Give examples of how we learn about this character through: his physical appearance, his surroundings, his thoughts, speech, actions, and other characters’ reactions to him.
3. Is Raskolnikov a completely immoral character? Why, why not?
4. Consider the secondary characters in the novel—Raskolnikov’s mother (Pulcheria Alex) and sister (Dounia), his companion (Razumihin), the police chief, the townspeople, the pawn broker (Katerina Ivanovna) and her sister (Lizaveta), the prostitute (Sonia). How would you characterize them? Does any one of them act as a redemptive force? Explain.
5. In Chapter 5, part 3, what argument does Raskolnikov’s article set forth regarding the right to commit “breaches of morality and crime”? Is this Dostoevsky’s argument too? Why, why not?
6. Raskolnikov is an intellectual: he was studying for the law; he published articles. Why do you think Dostoevsky assigned intellectual traits to his murderer? How, according to him, is the autonomous intellect, an intellect apart from spiritual faith and love for humanity, dangerous?
7. How does Raskolnikov rationalize his murder? Later, why does he confess—first to Sonia and then to the authorities?
8. Which other crimes/criminals, besides Raskolnikov, are present in the novel? Discuss their significance in terms of the novel’s overall themes.
9. Consider the Lazarus story that Sonia reads to Raskolnikov. Then discuss how he is “resurrected” spiritually?

PICNIC LIGHTNING **by Billy Collins**

Be prepared to explicate five of your favorite poems in terms of both meaning and rhetorical device.

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THE CRUCIBLE **by Arthur Miller**

1. Although set during the time of the Salem Witchcraft Trials, *The Crucible* is a play about modern times. According to Miller himself, the play was written in response to the rise of McCarthyism that occurred in the 1950s. And according to him, it is McCarthyism which “underlies every word of the play.” Visit a local library or go online to find out what you can about “McCarthyism” and the “Red Scare.” Then, be prepared to discuss how the story of the Salem Witch Trials illustrates what Miller feared most about Senator McCarthy and his campaign from the far Right.
2. According to Miller, the tragedy of the play revolves around the conclusion that conscience is not allowed to be a private matter, but rather is forced to be the concern of state administration. Be prepared to discuss how this is true.
3. Although the play is not completely accurate historically, the fate of each character is exactly that of his/her historical model. Consequently, the play can be read as a kind of dramatized historical document. What does it suggest about early Puritan America, especially with respect to its notions of justice, tolerance, piety, compassion, etc.?
4. In addition to being an illustration of an entire religious community, the play is also an intensely personal drama. Be prepared to discuss how this is true, especially with respect to its portrayal of the human defeats and triumphs incurred through love, lust, jealousy, self-sacrifice, etc.