
AP[®] English Literature and Composition

Sample Student Responses and Scoring Commentary

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Free-Response Question 1

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Question 1: Poetry Analysis

6 points

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.

In your response you should do the following:

- Respond to the prompt with a thesis that presents a defensible interpretation.
- Select and use evidence to support your line of reasoning.
- Explain how the evidence supports your line of reasoning.
- Use appropriate grammar and punctuation in communicating your argument.

Reporting Category	Scoring Criteria	
<p>Row A Thesis (0–1 points)</p>	<p>0 points For any of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is no defensible thesis. • The intended thesis only restates the prompt. • The intended thesis provides a summary of the issue with no apparent or coherent claim. • There is a thesis, but it does not respond to the prompt. 	<p>1 point Responds to the prompt with a thesis that presents a defensible interpretation of the poem.</p>
Decision Rules and Scoring Notes		
<p>Responses that do not earn this point:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only restate the prompt. • Make a generalized comment about the poem that doesn't respond to the prompt. • Describe the poem or features of the poem rather than making a claim that requires a defense. 		<p>Responses that earn this point:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide a defensible interpretation of the speaker's complex associations with the ritual of shaving.
<p>Examples that do not earn this point:</p> <p>Restate the prompt</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"The poet develops the complex associations with shaving through the use of several literary techniques."</i> • <i>"In his poem 'Shaving,' published in 1998, Richard Blanco presents a speaker that writes about the act of shaving and his complex relationship with it."</i> <p>Do not relate to the prompt</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"The loss of a parent is a difficult one, something that many people have to deal with as they get older."</i> <p>Describe the poem or features of the poem</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"Blanco's poem is made up of three stanzas that talk about shaving. He uses figurative language to convey many of his ideas."</i> 		<p>Examples that earn this point:</p> <p>Provide a defensible interpretation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"In the 1998 poem 'Shaving,' Richard Blanco employs the literary technique of stream of consciousness to show how the simple act of shaving inspires complex associations with the father he barely knew."</i> • <i>"The poem links the speaker's daily ritual of shaving new growth to the cycles of regeneration in nature and then ultimately to his father, whom he starts to see reborn in himself."</i> • <i>"Blanco uses vivid imagery and the presentation of the narrator's thoughts to reveal how the act of shaving connects the narrator to his father, who seems to have died young, which then reminds the narrator of his own mortality."</i>
<p>Additional Notes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The thesis may be more than one sentence, provided the sentences are in close proximity. • The thesis may be anywhere within the response. • For a thesis to be defensible, the poem must include at least minimal evidence that <i>could</i> be used to support that thesis; however, the student need not cite that evidence to earn the thesis point. • The thesis <i>may</i> establish a line of reasoning that structures the essay, but it needn't do so to earn the thesis point. • A thesis that meets the criteria can be awarded the point whether or not the rest of the response successfully supports that line of reasoning. 		

Reporting Category	Scoring Criteria				
Row B Evidence AND Commentary (0–4 points)	0 points Simply restates thesis (if present), repeats provided information, or offers information irrelevant to the prompt.	1 point EVIDENCE: Provides evidence that is mostly general. AND COMMENTARY: Summarizes the evidence but does not explain how the evidence supports the student’s argument.	2 points EVIDENCE: Provides some specific, relevant evidence. AND COMMENTARY: Explains how some of the evidence relates to the student’s argument, but no line of reasoning is established, or the line of reasoning is faulty.	3 points EVIDENCE: Provides specific evidence to support all claims in a line of reasoning. AND COMMENTARY: Explains how some of the evidence supports a line of reasoning. AND Explains how at least one literary element or technique in the poem contributes to its meaning.	4 points EVIDENCE: Provides specific evidence to support all claims in a line of reasoning. AND COMMENTARY: Consistently explains how the evidence supports a line of reasoning. AND Explains how multiple literary elements or techniques in the poem contribute to its meaning.
	Decision Rules and Scoring Notes				
	Typical responses that earn 0 points: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are incoherent or do not address the prompt. May be just opinion with no textual references or references that are irrelevant. 	Typical responses that earn 1 point: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tend to focus on summary or description of the poem rather than specific details or techniques. Mention literary elements, devices, or techniques with little or no explanation. 	Typical responses that earn 2 points: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consist of a mix of specific evidence and broad generalities. May contain some simplistic, inaccurate, or repetitive explanations that don’t strengthen the argument. May make one point well but either do not make multiple supporting claims or do not adequately support more than one claim. Do not explain the connections or progression between the student’s claims, so a line of reasoning is not clearly established. 	Typical responses that earn 3 points: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Uniformly offer evidence to support claims. Focus on the importance of specific words and details from the poem to build an interpretation. Organize an argument as a line of reasoning composed of multiple supporting claims. Commentary may fail to integrate some evidence or fail to support a key claim. 	Typical responses that earn 4 points: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Uniformly offer evidence to support claims. Focus on the importance of specific words and details from the poem to build an interpretation. Organize and support an argument as a line of reasoning composed of multiple supporting claims, each with adequate evidence that is clearly explained. Explain how the writer’s use of multiple literary techniques contributes to the student’s interpretation of the poem.
Additional Notes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Writing that suffers from grammatical and/or mechanical errors that interfere with communication cannot earn the fourth point in this row. To earn the fourth point in this row, the response may observe multiple instances of the same literary element or technique if each instance further contributes 					

Reporting Category	Scoring Criteria	
Row C Sophistication (0–1 points)	0 points Does not meet the criteria for one point.	1 point Demonstrates sophistication of thought and/or develops a complex literary argument.
	Decision Rules and Scoring Notes	
	Responses that do not earn this point: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attempt to contextualize their interpretation, but such attempts consist predominantly of sweeping generalizations (“<i>Human experiences always include ...</i>” OR “<i>In a world where ...</i>” OR “<i>Since the beginning of time ...</i>”). • Only hint at or suggest other possible interpretations (“<i>While another reader may see ...</i>” OR “<i>Though the poem could be said to ...</i>”). • Make a single statement about how an interpretation of the poem comments on something thematic without consistently maintaining that thematic interpretation. • Oversimplify complexities in the poem. • Use complicated or complex sentences or language that is ineffective because it does not enhance the student’s argument. 	Responses that earn this point may demonstrate sophistication of thought or develop a complex literary argument by doing any of the following: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identifying and exploring complexities or tensions within the poem. 2. Illuminating the student’s interpretation by situating it within a broader context. 3. Accounting for alternative interpretations of the poem. 4. Employing a style that is consistently vivid and persuasive.
Additional Notes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This point should be awarded only if the sophistication of thought or complex understanding is part of the student’s argument, not merely a phrase or reference. 		

Important: Completely fill in the circle that corresponds to the question you are answering on this page.

Question 1

Question 2

Question 3

Begin your response to each question at the top of a new page. Do not skip lines.

In Richard Blanco's "Shaving," the elaborate use of similes and the idea of shaving itself as a metaphor for fatherly traces in the narrator's memories portrays that life is fragile and silently slips by, just like ~~the~~ the miniscule ~~growth~~ unperceivable growth of whiskers or a beard, and that while such changes are often overlooked, one instance in life can allow one to perceive such changes, as those are essential to the identity of an individual. In the beginning, the narrator starts out by comparing the formation of the beard to elaborate descriptions of "silent labor," "like ocean steam rising to form clouds; or the bloom of spiderwebs each morning." The simile comparing the growth of the beard to the imagery of ocean water rising serves to portray such growth of hair as unperceivable, yet can ~~to~~ create a large effect ~~in~~ in the long run, just like how the evaporation of water is unable to be seen with the naked eye, yet, it allows the formation of large perceivable clouds in the sky. The growth of hair, just like the ~~the~~ circulation of water from the ocean to the sky as the water itself changes phase, but does not change its molecular identity, is also a symbol ~~is~~ for the passage of time and the idea of aging and life. Even as the length of hair changes, the individual's identity stays the same. This idea of hair growth and the silent ~~but~~ change associated with time portrays the idea that life ~~and~~ continuously moves on and time continuously ticks, even if it is not perceivable to the narrator. The blooms of spiderwebs also serve a similar purpose as the ~~the~~ metaphor comparing spiderwebs as something that can bloom, like a flower, portrays the presence of life and vitality. Soon, however, the narrator shifts from this ethereal and calm perception of hair growth to the sudden ~~death~~ death of the father, ~~and~~.

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Question 3



Begin your response to each question at the top of a new page. Do not skip lines.

The narrator recalls their father in a memory of which ^{his father} ~~he~~ was "in tiny snips of black whiskers swirling in the drain — dead pieces of the self from the face that never taught me how to shave." First, ~~the~~ the act of shaving acts as a symbol of combatting with the continual nature of time, as shaving cuts off the "silent" growth of hair, or the traces of the passage of time. By comparing the narrator's memories of their passed father with a sudden, jarring stop in hair growth, indicates the abruptness of the father's death. However, ironically, such death is caused by the ~~the~~ unperceivable passage of time again as the narrator seems to recall as if their father slipped away from life slowly and silently. ~~the passage~~ The black whiskers act as a reminder of the growth of hair, the passage of time, and the past, specifically as the act of shaving itself is imprinted in the narrator's mind as an activity closely associated to their father. Therefore, such act of shaving not only acts as a reminder of the father's death, but also of the impermanence of life and how even the slow growth of hair — like the ^{slow} progression of time — can be halted instantly, as for the father, because of his death, and for the son, the figurative stopping of time due to ~~the~~ the massive impact of his father's death on his individual identity and life.

~~The slow progression of time, the~~

In addition, shaving seems to act as an extended metaphor for the ability to reflect and "stop" ^{one's perception of} time as the act of cutting the growth of ~~the~~ hair momentarily changes the course of growth. As the narrator recalls, before shaving, his face contained a "full beard ... [as if his] eyes don't recognize themselves in a mirror echoed with a hundred faces."

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Question 1

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Question 3

Begin your response to each question at the top of a new page. Do not skip lines.

~~The usage of eyes~~ The usage of eyes and recognition acts as a synecdoche to portray the identity of the narrator itself, as eyes are typically associated with perception and perspective. The fact that the narrator is unable to recognize his own face acts as an indication that the beard, reminiscent of the passing of time, indicates that ~~the~~ such passing of time changes an individual drastically ~~at~~ over a long period. ~~However, as the poem returns back to the idea of~~ The fact that shaving, can, in a "split second" revert the narrator to ~~the~~ where "roses drink and clouds form" indicates the power of the act of shaving to seemingly stop the passage of time and allow the narrator to reflect on himself. In addition, ~~the fact that the poem repeats~~ the repetition of the same similes as stated in the beginning of the poem indicate that to the narrator, the act of shaving brings him back to the past, where everything seemed calm and tranquil. However, since this is also the present, the mention of such similes acts as an indication of the cyclical nature of life, as one ending leads to another beginning, and regardless of the events that occur in a lifetime that may alter an individual, time, and therefore life continues to progress. Hardships may ~~they~~ present themselves, but life goes on and the slow, silent works of time continuously changes an individual.

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Important: Completely fill in the circle that corresponds to the question you are answering on this page.

Question 1

Question 2

Question 3



Begin your response to each question at the top of a new page. Do not skip lines.

In "Shaving", a poem by Richard Blanco published in 1998, the speaker is contemplative about the natural aspect of his beard; compares his beard to natural processes, but is then reminded of his father's quiet passing, reminiscent of his father. Although slightly saddened by his father's death, he becomes understanding about how quickly things vanish right before us.

Instead of viewing his beard as an ordinary object, the speaker considers it "a creation of silent labor", which he then compares to "ocean steam rising to form clouds". This shows that the growth of hair is something that happens right before our eyes, but it is a process so quiet, we do not often realize it. This also establishes the theme of the poem, that things can occur and disappear without a moment's hesitation or single notice.

While contemplating processes that happen before us, yet we fail to notice, the speaker is reminded of his late father, whose "life passed us by". The speaker reveals that whenever he does shave, he "remembers him in a masquerade of foam". This shows that the speaker is reminiscent of his father, and only recently realizes how quickly his life passed before him. This also alludes to the speaker having the regret of not realizing how quickly good things can vanish.

The speaker, however, comes out enlightened, assenting that he "most understand(s) the invisibility of life", as well as "the intensity of vanishing". This shows that the speaker has

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Begin your response to each question at the top of a new page. Do not skip lines.

come to terms with the fact that things will eventually vanish, even right before him. This implies that the speaker has also come to terms with his father's passing.

In real life, things often come & go, often times so fast, we do not even notice. We should appreciate what we have now, otherwise we'll regret not doing so later.

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Important: Completely fill in the circle that corresponds to the question you are answering on this page.

Question 1

Question 2

Question 3



Begin your response to each question at the top of a new page. Do not skip lines.

In Richard Blanco's poem "Shaving", Blanco uses literary elements and techniques such as ~~figurative~~ ~~metaphor~~ metaphor in order to show us how fast life passes and the changes that occurs without even realizing it. Sometimes, we focus too much on doing something that we don't even pay attention to the things that we have at the moment. Forgetting that one day we can lose it. Blanco demonstrates the use of the literary element called "metaphor" by stating: "how my beard is a creation of silent labor like ocean steam rising to form clouds, or the bloom of spiderwebs each morning; the discrete mystery of how whiskers grow, like the drink roses take from the vase, or the fall of fresh rain, becoming a river, and then rain again, so silently." This evidence reveals that things can change from one day to another, sometimes ~~for us~~ what we see as a normality can turn into something unusual or unexpected for you and many other people. Additionally, this evidence supports my statement because when you concentrate too much on your own things you don't care about other people business; what I mean by this is that when you are doing something that you really enjoy, you lose track of time and don't even have time to check on and ask about other people lives. Furthermore, the author also ~~illustrates~~ ~~the~~ ~~idea~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~idea~~ tries to convey that as life goes very fast and things can suddenly change we should really enjoy it by taking care of our loved ones before it's too late.

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Question 1

Note: Student samples are quoted verbatim and may contain spelling and grammatical errors.

Overview

For Question 1, the poetry analysis question, students were asked to read Richard Blanco’s poem “Shaving” and respond to the following 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.

In a timed-writing situation and with an unfamiliar text, students were expected to complete three tasks successfully. They were expected to:

- read the poem carefully,
- analyze the speaker’s complex associations with the ritual of shaving, and
- write a well-written response based on that analysis.

Reading the poem involves more than simply understanding individual words and describing what happens. Students were expected to view the text specifically as a poem, recognizing literary elements and techniques used in the context of poetry, and then analyze how those techniques are used to shape the poem and its meaning. For example, in “Shaving,” students might have noticed the three-part structure of the poem; the repetition of “I” and “I am not shaving”; the use of similes; the role of dashes and the type of content they highlight; or the length of the sentences, with lines sometimes ending in commas (and sometimes not). They could also question the role of the father in the poem and note that the poem, despite its title, is about more than “Shaving.”

Analyzing the poem means taking the relevant elements that students identified in their reading and thinking about how the parts function collectively to create the meaning of the work as a whole. In this case, students needed to consider how the identified elements develop the speaker’s complex associations with the act of shaving. The word “complex” here reminds students to look for and explore the shifting, contradictory, or paradoxical aspects of the poem. Identifying important aspects of the poem and thinking through their relationship to the work as a whole leads students to a defensible interpretation.

Writing a well-written response means demonstrating a variety of skills. Students were asked to establish a thesis that shows understanding of the speaker’s complex associations with the act of shaving. They were asked to build this argument with specific, relevant evidence from the poem and through their own commentary that explains the connection between their argument and the evidence. The more successful responses built a line of reasoning that connects ideas and shows the relationships between them. A well-written response is more than grammatically correct writing, and it should be noted that students were not expected in the timed-writing situation to write a polished, revised essay.

Question 1 (continued)**Sample: 1A****Score: 1-4-1****Row A: Thesis (0–1 points): 1**

The response earned the point in Row A through its presentation of a defensible thesis, located at the beginning of the essay: “In Richard Blanco’s ‘Shaving,’ the elaborate use of similes and the idea of shaving itself as a metaphor for fatherly traces in the narrator’s memories portrays that life is fragile and silently slips by, just like the miniscule unperceivable growth of whiskers or a beard, and that while such changes are often overlooked, one instance in life can allow one to perceive such changes, as those are essential to the identity of an individual.” The thesis is insightful and presents a complex interpretation of the poem.

Row B: Evidence and Commentary (0–4 points): 4

The evidence and commentary in this essay build a line of reasoning around the idea of the passage of time and how shaving connects to it. The response provides a wide range of specific evidence and examines Blanco’s use of several literary techniques in order to build this interpretation. The essay analyzes Blanco’s simile comparing “the formation of the beard” to “‘silent labor, ... like ocean steam rising to form clouds, or the bloom of spiderwebs each morning’” and comments that this figurative language “serves to portray such growth of hair as unperceivable.” The same paragraph describes Blanco’s depiction of “the circulation of water from the ocean to the sky” as “a symbol for the passage of time and the idea of aging and life.” The response shifts from an examination of the “ethereal and calm perception of hair growth to the sudden death of the father,” which is developed through a consideration of the image of “‘tiny snips of black whiskers swirling in the drain—dead pieces of the self.’” The response comments on this evidence with the argument that “the act of shaving acts as a symbol of combatting with the continual nature of time.” The essay points out the irony of the narrator’s father’s death, “caused by the unperceivable passage of time,” and argues that the act of shaving “not only acts as a reminder of the father’s death, but also of the impermanence of life and how even the slow growth of hair—like the slow progression of time—can be halted instantly.” The essay further argues that Blanco’s description of shaving is an extended metaphor “for the ability to reflect and ‘stop’ one’s perception of time” and presents the use of eyes as synecdoche, “as eyes are typically associated with perception and perspective.” The student also astutely notes that in stanza 3, the “repetition of the same similes as stated in the beginning of the poem indicate that to the narrator, the act of shaving brings him back to the past, where everything seemed calm and tranquil” and “acts as an indication of the cyclical nature of life.” Consistent and perceptive commentary clearly connects the student’s apt choices of specific evidence to the thesis and develops the line of reasoning. This response earned 4 points in Row B.

Row C: Sophistication (0–1 points): 1

The response addresses the complexities and tensions within the poem and employs a consistently persuasive style as evidenced in this sentence found in the conclusion: “The fact that shaving can, in a ‘split second’ revert the narrator to where ‘roses drink and clouds form’ indicates the power of the act of shaving to seemingly stop the passage of time and allow the narrator to reflect on him self.” The essay earned the sophistication point in Row C.

Question 1 (continued)

Sample: 1B

Score: 1-3-0

Row A: Thesis (0–1 points): 1

This essay responds to the prompt with a defensible thesis presented in the introductory paragraph: “Although slightly saddened by his father’s death, he [the speaker] becomes understanding about how quickly things vanish right before us.” This response earned the point in Row A.

Row B: Evidence and Commentary (0–4 points): 3

The essay provides specific evidence, and the commentary explains how some of that evidence supports a line of reasoning that focuses on the ephemeral nature of life. In paragraph 2, the response considers lines from stanza 1 of the poem and argues that they demonstrate “that the growth of hair is something that happens right before our eyes, but it is a process so quiet, we do not often realize it.” Paragraph 3 concentrates on the significance of Blanco’s use of the line “remembers him in a masquerade of foam”; the student argues that the line “shows that the speaker is reminiscent of his father, and only recently realizes how quickly his life passed before him” and “alludes to the speaker having the regret of not realizing how quickly good things can vanish.” In paragraph 4, the response suggests, “The speaker, however, comes out enlightened” and uses the lines “most understand(s) the invisibility of life” and “the intensity of vanishing” as evidence of this enlightenment. The essay concludes with the argument that “the speaker has also come to terms with his father’s passing.” The commentary provided throughout the essay, while apt, is also terse; a line of reasoning is established, but the student does not explain how all of the evidence supports it. The essay contains implicit references to imagery and flashbacks; however, it does not address specific literary elements found in the poem. This response earned 3 points in Row B.

Row C: Sophistication (0–1 points): 0

This response did not meet the criteria for the point in Row C because it oversimplifies the complexities in the poem: “This also establishes the theme of the poem, that things can occur & disappear without a moment’s hesitation or single notice.” Additionally, the student’s attempt to situate the interpretation within a broader context (“In real life, things often come & go, often times so fast, we do not even notice”) falls into the realm of sweeping generalization.

Sample: 1C

Score: 1-1-0

Row A: Thesis (0–1 points): 1

The thesis for this essay is found at the beginning of the response: “In Richard Blanco’s poem ‘Shaving’, Blanco uses literary elements and techniques such as metaphor in order to show us how fast life passes and the changes that occurs without even realizing it. Some times, we focus too much on doing something that we don’t even pay attention to the things that we have at the moment. Forgetting that one day we can loose it.” The thesis presents a defensible interpretation and, therefore, earned the point in Row A.

Row B: Evidence and Commentary (0–4 points): 1

The response offers slight evidence and simplistic commentary. No line of reasoning is established. The response presents one piece of evidence which consists of lines 3–9 of the poem, and while the

Question 1 (continued)

essay identifies a metaphor within the lines, no explanation of the specific metaphor or its significance is provided. The commentary puts forth generalizations such as “This evidence reveals that things can change from one day to another, some times what we see as a normality can turn into something unusual or unexpected for you and many other people.” The essay also contends that “when you are doing something that you really enjoy, you lose track of time and don’t even have time to check on and ask about other people lives,” but this point seems tangentially related to the thesis. This essay earned 1 point in Row B.

Row C: Sophistication (0–1 points): 0

This response did not earn the sophistication point in Row C because it oversimplifies complexities in the poem; for example, “when you concentrate too much on your own things you don’t care about other people business.” The essay does not demonstrate sophistication of thought or develop a complex literary argument.