

Connotations, ambiguities, and other meanings

Even as you develop a respect for the literal, dictionary definitions of the words used by an author, you must also be aware that just about every word an author might choose to use has, in addition to its denotation, any number of *connotations*—meanings that are commonly accepted by speakers, readers, and writers. The challenge that being aware of possible connotative meanings is that these connotations can change over time and place. Depending on time and place, for example, *to redeem* can mean to save a soul from eternal torment, pay a ransom for a prisoner taken in battle, or turn in a coupon for a fifty-cent discount.

Even after you look up the word in a dictionary, you cannot hope to fully understand the words—or the text they build—without also taking into consideration what the words may have meant at the time and in the place the author wrote them.

This issue of connotation is one of the factors that make different interpretations possible. It is true that a single text may have several possible meanings. It is also possible, however, for a reader's interpretation to be inaccurate or invalid if it is not grounded in what the words really mean—whether denotatively or connotatively.

Another factor that can complicate your effort to understand the text's meaning is the fact that even the denotations of many words can be vague, abstract, open to interpretation. Some words are simply vague. When does the weather pass from *cool* to *cold*? (By the same token, at what temperature does something that was *warm* become *hot*?)

Some words are ambiguous. They have two or more denotations that might often seem incompatible or contradictory. Consider the simple word *cut*. One can *cut* a class without *cutting* it from his or her schedule. If you are not *cut*, then you have made the *cut*. A *cut* on your arm is probably a bad thing, but a *cut* of meat can be a good thing.

While an author's use of *cut* might be absolutely clear, there might also be subtle implications in the author's choice of a word like *cut* as opposed to a clearer, less ambiguous alternative like *skip* or *miss*, *excise*, or *reduce*. Just as it is important to consider what the word *literally* means according to a reliable dictionary, it is important to consider what *else* the writer may have meant by choosing a particular word.

The following story, Jack London's "To Build a Fire," seems to present no challenges to a reader looking for comprehension, but some of the clearest words have multiple meanings and a variety of connotations that create several levels of tone, mood, and meaning. The text has been annotated to point out to you how a full understanding of the words' meanings will contribute to a reader's understanding of the text as a whole.

To Build a Fire

JACK LONDON (1876 - 1916)

DAY HAD BROKEN COLD AND GREY, exceedingly cold and grey, when the man turned aside from the main Yukon trail and climbed the high earth-bank, where a dim and little-travelled trail led eastward through the fat spruce timberland. It was a steep bank, and he paused for breath at the top, excusing the act to himself by looking at his watch. It was nine o'clock. There was no sun nor hint of sun, though there was not a cloud in the sky. It was a clear day, and yet there seemed an intangible pall¹ over the face of things, a subtle gloom that made the day dark, and that was due to the absence of sun. This fact did not worry the man. He was used to the lack of sun. It had been days since he had seen the sun, and he knew that a few more days must pass before that cheerful orb,² due south, would just peep above the sky-line and dip immediately from view.

The man flung a look back along the way he had come. The Yukon lay a mile wide and hidden under three feet of ice. On top of this ice were as many feet of snow. It was all pure white, rolling in gentle undulations where the ice-jams of the freeze-up had formed. North and south, as far as his eye could see, it was unbroken white, save for a dark hair-line that curved and twisted from around the spruce-covered island to the south, and that curved and twisted away into the north, where it disappeared behind another spruce-covered island. This dark hair-line was the trail—the main trail—that led south five hundred miles to the Chilcoot Pass, Dyea, and salt water, and that led north seventy miles to Dawson, and still on to the north a thousand miles to Nulato, and finally to St. Michael on Bering Sea, a thousand miles and half a thousand more.

But all this—the mysterious, far-reaching hairline trail, the absence of sun from the sky, the tremendous cold,³ and the strangeness and weirdness of it all—made no impression on the man. It was not because he was long used to it. He was a new-comer in the land, a *chetchquo*, and this was his first winter. The trouble with him was that he was without imagination. He was quick and alert in the things of life, but only in the things, and not in the significances. Fifty degrees below zero meant eighty odd degrees of frost. Such fact impressed him as being cold and uncomfortable,⁴ and that was all. It did not lead him to meditate upon his frailty as a creature of temperature, and upon man's frailty in general, able only to live within certain narrow limits⁵ of heat and cold;

Sample Student Commentary

- Literally, a pall is a shroud, a sheet used to cover a corpse. It has also come to mean any dismal or somber covering, even a permeating feeling of gloom.
- An orb is a sphere, so this is a literal reference to the sun. To ascribe the attribute of cheerfulness to the sun is personification. It projects the cheer of a person seeing the sun after a long period of darkness onto the sun and contrasts the cheer of the sun's appearance with the gloom of the long, northern night.
- Denotations of *tremendous* include "inspiring awe or wonder," and "extremely large." Both denotations are broadened to communicate just how cold it is.
- A literal use of the word but, probably an understatement.
- Literally, London means "narrow range," but his unconventional choice of limits emphasizes the narrowness.

and from there on it did not lead him to the conjectural field of immortality and man's place in the universe. Fifty degrees below zero stood for a bite of frost⁶ that hurt and that must be guarded against by the use of mittens, ear-flaps, warm moccasins, and thick socks. Fifty degrees below zero was to him just precisely fifty degrees below zero. That there should be anything more to it than that was a thought that never entered his head.

As he turned to go on, he spat speculatively. There was a sharp, explosive crackle that startled him. He spat again. And again, in the air, before it could fall to the snow, the spittle cracked. He knew that at fifty below spittle crackled on the snow, but this spittle had crackled in the air. Undoubtedly it was colder than fifty below—how much colder he did not know. But the temperature did not matter. He was bound for the old claim on the left fork of Henderson Creek, where the boys were already. They had come over across the divide from the Indian Creek country, while he had come the roundabout way to take a look at the possibilities of getting out logs in the spring from the islands in the Yukon. He would be in to camp by six o'clock; a bit after dark, it was true, but the boys would be there, a fire would be going, and a hot supper would be ready. As for lunch, he pressed his hand against the protruding bundle under his jacket. It was also under his shirt, wrapped up in a handkerchief and lying against the naked skin. It was the only way to keep the biscuits from freezing. He smiled agreeably to himself as he thought of those biscuits, each cut open and sopped in bacon grease, and each enclosing a generous slice of fried bacon.

He plunged⁸ in among the big spruce trees. The trail was faint. A foot of snow had fallen since the last sled had passed over, and he was glad he was without a sled, travelling light. In fact, he carried nothing but the lunch wrapped in the handkerchief. He was surprised, however, at the cold. It certainly was cold, he concluded, as he rubbed his numbed nose and cheek-bones with his mittened hand. He was a warm-whiskered⁹ man, but the hair on his face did not protect the high cheek-bones and the eager nose¹⁰ that thrust itself aggressively into the frosty air.

At the man's heels trotted a dog, a big native husky, the proper wolf-dog, grey-coated and without any visible or temperamental difference from its brother, the wild wolf. The animal was depressed by the tremendous cold. It knew that it was no time for travelling. Its instinct told it a truer tale than was told to the man by the man's judgment. In reality, it was not merely colder than fifty below zero; it was colder than sixty below, than seventy below. It was seventy-five below zero. Since the freezing-point is thirty-two above zero, it meant that one hundred and seven degrees of frost obtained.¹¹ The dog did not know

Sample Student Commentary

- Frostbite is, indeed, the literal term for the damage done to the body by severe cold. The word itself, however, is both personification and metaphor. Frost cannot literally "bite."
- Another stretch of a literal definition into hyperbole.
- Actually a literal use of the word, and it does create a graphic image of the man's movement.
- A colloquialism among men in the Yukon at that time. It certainly presents a vivid image of the man's beard.
- The nose, of course, cannot literally be "eager," but because of its position and shape, it does tend to travel an inch or so ahead of the rest of the man's body, as if it were eager to arrive first.
- An archaic definition of *obtain* is to succeed in the sense of "to follow" or "come after."

anything about thermometers. Possibly in its brain there was no sharp consciousness of a condition of very cold such as was in the man's brain. But the brute¹² had its instinct. It experienced a vague but menacing apprehension that subdued it and made it slink along at the man's heels, and that made it question eagerly every unwonted movement of the man as if expecting him to go into camp or to seek shelter somewhere and build a fire. The dog had learned fire, and it wanted fire, or else to burrow under the snow and cuddle its warmth away from the air.

The frozen moisture of its breathing had settled on its fur in a fine powder of frost, and especially were its jowls, muzzle, and eyelashes whitened by its crystallized breath¹³. The man's red beard and moustache were likewise frosted, but more solidly, the deposit taking the form of ice and increasing with every warm, moist breath he exhaled. Also, the man was chewing tobacco, and the muzzle of ice¹⁴ held his lips so rigidly that he was unable to clear his chin when he expelled the juice. The result was that a crystal beard of the color and solidity of amber was increasing its length on his chin. If he fell down it would shatter itself, like glass, into brittle fragments. But he did not mind the appendage. It was the penalty all tobacco-chewers paid in that country, and he had been out before in two cold snaps. They had not been so cold as this, he knew, but by the spirit thermometer¹ at Sixty Mile he knew they had been registered at fifty below and at fifty-five.

He held on through the level stretch of woods for several miles, crossed a wide flat of nigger-heads¹, and dropped down a bank to the frozen bed of a small stream. This was Henderson Creek, and he knew he was ten miles from the forks. He looked at his watch. It was ten o'clock. He was making four miles an hour, and he calculated that he would arrive at the forks at half-past twelve. He decided to celebrate that event by eating his lunch there.

The dog dropped in again at his heels, with a tail drooping discouragement, as the man swung along the creek-bed. The furrow of the old sled-trail was plainly visible, but a dozen inches of snow covered the marks of the last runners. In a month no man had come up or down that silent creek. The man held steadily on. He was not much given to thinking, and just then particularly he had nothing to think about save that he would eat lunch at the forks and that at six o'clock he would be in camp with the boys. There was nobody to talk to and, had there been, speech would have been impossible because of the ice-muzzle on his mouth. So he continued monotonously to chew tobacco and to increase the length of his amber beard.

Once in a while the thought reiterated itself that it was very cold and that he had never experienced such cold. As he walked along he rubbed his cheek-bones and nose with the

¹ A thermometer made with alcohol (distilled spirit) instead of mercury.

² An archaic, colloquial term for any of a number of grasses that grow in bunches or tufts.

Sample Student Commentary

¹² Denotatively, brute does have to do with animals and animal nature. Connotatively, it carries a sense of savagery not necessarily included in the denotation.

¹³ Literally, to crystallize includes any substance's taking on a crystalline form. The connotative image of glittering, diamond-like crystals is what gives this description its power as an image.

¹⁴ Another image based largely on the denotation of muzzle as a covering for the mouth of an animal to prevent biting.

back of his mittened hand. He did this automatically, now and again changing hands. But rub as he would, the instant he stopped his cheek-bones went numb, and the following instant the end of his nose went numb. He was sure to frost his cheeks; he knew that, and experienced a pang of regret that he had not devised a nose-strap of the sort Bud wore in cold snaps. Such a strap passed across the cheeks, as well, and saved them. But it didn't matter much, after all. What were frosted cheeks? A bit painful, that was all; they were never serious.

Empty as the man's mind was of thoughts, he was keenly observant, and he noticed the changes in the creek, the curves and bends and timber-jams, and always he sharply noted where he placed his feet. Once, coming around a bend, he shied abruptly, like a startled horse, curved away from the place where he had been walking, and retreated several paces back along the trail. The creek he knew was frozen clear to the bottom—no creek could contain water in that arctic winter—but he knew also that there were springs that bubbled out from the hill-sides and ran along under the snow and on top of the creek. He knew that the coldest snaps never froze these springs, and he knew likewise their danger. They were traps. They hid pools of water under the snow that might be three inches deep, or three feet. Sometimes a skin¹⁵ of ice half an inch thick covered them, and in turn was covered by the snow. Sometimes there were alternate layers of water and ice-skin, so that when one broke through he kept on breaking through for a while, sometimes wetting himself to the waist.

That was why he had shied in such panic. He had felt the give under his feet and heard the crackle of a snow-hidden ice-skin. And to get his feet wet in such a temperature meant trouble and danger. At the very least it meant delay, for he would be forced to stop and build a fire, and under its protection to bare his feet while he dried his socks and moccasins. He stood and studied the creek-bed and its banks, and decided that the flow of water came from the right. He reflected awhile, rubbing his nose and cheeks, then skirted to the left, stepping gingerly and testing the footing for each step. Once clear of the danger, he took a fresh chew of tobacco and swung along at his four-mile gait.

In the course of the next two hours he came upon several similar traps. Usually the snow above the hidden pools had a sunken, candied appearance that advertised the danger. Once again, however, he had a close call; and once, suspecting danger, he compelled the dog to go on in front. The dog did not want to go. It hung back until the man shoved it forward, and then it went quickly across the white, unbroken surface. Suddenly it broke through, floundered to one side, and got away to firmer footing. It had wet its forefeet and legs, and almost immediately the water that clung to it turned to ice. It made quick efforts to lick the ice off its legs, then dropped down in the snow and began to bite out the ice that had formed between the toes. This was a matter of instinct. To permit the ice to remain would mean sore feet. It did not know this. It merely obeyed the mysterious prompting that arose from the deep cryps¹⁶ of its being. But the

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¹⁵ Another connotative use based closely on the word's primary denotation.

¹⁶ Here is an excellent metaphorical use based on an unconventional use of the word's connotation. Literally, a crypt is an underground chamber. Connotatively, it is associated with deep secrets and often death. By using this word to name the origins of the animal's instinct, London is emphasizing the sense of mysterious, hidden knowledge that is instinct. Crypt's association with death also contributes to the story's mood of gloom and foreboding.

man knew, having achieved a judgment on the subject, and he removed the mitten from his right hand and helped tear out the ice-particles. He did not expose his fingers more than a minute, and was astonished at the swift numbness that smote¹⁷ them. It certainly was cold. He pulled on the mitten hastily, and beat the hand savagely¹⁸ across his chest.

14 At twelve o'clock the day was at its brightest. Yet the sun was too far south on its winter journey to clear the horizon. The bulge of the earth intervened between it and Henderson Creek, where the man walked under a clear sky at noon and cast no shadow. At half-past twelve, to the minute, he arrived at the forks of the creek. He was pleased at the speed he had made. If he kept it up, he would certainly be with the boys by six. He unbuttoned his jacket and shirt and drew forth his lunch. The action consumed no more than a quarter of a minute, yet in that brief moment the numbness laid hold of the exposed fingers. He did not put the mitten on, but, instead, struck the fingers a dozen sharp smashes against his leg. Then he sat down on a snow-covered log to eat. The sting that followed upon the striking of his fingers against his leg ceased so quickly that he was startled, he had had no chance to take a bite of biscuit. He struck the fingers repeatedly and returned them to the mitten, barring the other hand for the purpose of eating. He tried to take a mouthful, but the ice-muzzle prevented. He had forgotten to build a fire and thaw out. He chuckled at his foolishness, and as he chuckled he noted the numbness creeping into the exposed fingers. Also, he noted that the stinging which had first come to his toes when he sat down was already passing away. He wondered whether the toes were warm or numbed. He moved them inside the moccasins and decided that they were numbed.

15 He pulled the mitten on hurriedly and stood up. He was a bit frightened. He stamped up and down until the stinging returned into the feet. It certainly was cold, was his thought. That man from Sulphur Creek had spoken the truth when telling how cold it sometimes got in the country. And he had laughed at him at the time! That showed one must not be too sure of things. There was no mistake about it, it was cold. He strode up and down, stamping his feet and threshing his arms, until reassured by the returning warmth. Then he got out matches and proceeded to make a fire. From the undergrowth, where high water of the previous spring had lodged a supply of seasoned twigs, he got his firewood. Working carefully from a small beginning, he soon had a roaring fire, over which he thawed the ice from his face and in the protection of which he ate his biscuits. For the moment the cold of space was outwitted. The dog took satisfaction in the fire, stretching out close enough for warmth and far enough away to escape being singed.

16 When the man had finished, he filled his pipe and took his comfortable time over a smoke. Then he pulled on his mittens, settled the ear-flaps of his cap firmly about his ears, and took the creek trail up the left fork. The dog was disappointed and yearned back toward the fire. This man did not know cold. Possibly all the generations of his

Sample Student Commentary

¹⁷ Literally, to strike with a weapon. Its connotative association with medieval fighting and the romantic slaying of dragons adds a sense that the cold is an armed and skilled warrior, a formidable foe.

¹⁸ Literally, the word establishes the image of the man's pounding his chest. Connotatively, *savagely* emphasizes the implied comparison and contrast between the man and the wolf.

ancestry had been ignorant of cold, of real cold, of cold one hundred and seven degrees below freezing-point. But the dog knew; all its ancestry knew, and it had inherited the knowledge. And it knew that it was not good to walk abroad in such fearful cold. It was the time to lie snug in a hole in the snow and wait for a curtain of cloud to be drawn across the face of outer space whence this cold came. On the other hand, there was keen intimacy between the dog and the man. The one was the toil-slave of the other, and the only caresses it had ever received were the caresses of the whip-lash and of harsh and menacing throat-sounds that threatened the whip-lash. So the dog made no effort to communicate its apprehension to the man. It was not concerned in the welfare of the man; it was for its own sake that it yearned back toward the fire. But the man whistled, and spoke to it with the sound of whip-lashes, and the dog swung in at the man's heels and followed after.

17 The man took a chew of tobacco and proceeded to start a new amber beard. Also, his moist breath quickly powdered with white his moustache, eyebrows, and lashes. There did not seem to be so many springs on the left fork of the Henderson, and for half an hour the man saw no signs of any. And then it happened. At a place where there were no signs, where the soft, unbroken snow seemed to advertise solidity beneath, the man broke through. It was not deep. He wetted himself half-way to the knees before he floundered out to the firm crust.

18 He was angry, and cursed his luck aloud. He had hoped to get into camp with the boys at six o'clock, and this would delay him an hour, for he would have to build a fire and dry out his foot-gear. This was imperative at that low temperature—he knew that much; and he turned aside to the bank, which he climbed. On top, tangled in the underbrush about the trunks of several small spruce trees, was a high-water deposit of dry firewood—sticks and twigs principally, but also larger portions of seasoned branches and fine, dry, last-year's grasses. He threw down several large pieces on top of the snow. This served for a foundation and prevented the young flame from drowning itself in the snow it otherwise would melt. The flame he got by touching a match to a small shred of birch-bark that he took from his pocket. This burned even more readily than paper. Placing it on the foundation, he fed the young flame with wisps of dry grass and with the tiniest dry twigs.

19 He worked slowly and carefully, keenly aware of his danger. Gradually, as the flame grew stronger, he increased the size of the twigs with which he fed it. He squatted in the snow, pulling the twigs out from their entanglement in the brush and feeding directly to the flame. He knew there must be no failure. When it is seventy-five below zero, a man must not fail in his first attempt to build a fire—that is, if his feet are wet. If his feet are dry, and he fails, he can run along the trail for half a mile and restore his circulation. But the circulation of wet and freezing feet cannot be restored by running when it is seventy-five below. No matter how fast he runs, the wet feet will freeze the harder.

20 All this the man knew. The old-timer on Sulphur Creek had told him about it the previous fall, and now he was appreciating the advice. Already all sensation had gone out of his feet. To build the fire he had been forced to remove his mittens, and the fingers had quickly gone numb. His pace of four miles an hour had kept his heart pumping blood to the surface of his body and to all the extremities. But the instant he stopped, the action of

the pump eased down. The cold of space smote¹⁹ the unprotected tip of the planet, and he, being on that unprotected tip, received the full force of the blow.²⁰ The blood of his body recoiled before it. The blood was alive, like the dog, and like the dog it wanted to hide away and cover itself up from the fearful²¹ cold. So long as he walked four miles an hour, he pumped that blood, willy-nilly, to the surface; but now it ebbed away and sank down into the recesses of his body. The extremities were the first to feel its absence. His wet feet froze the faster, and his exposed fingers numbed the faster, though they had not yet begun to freeze. Nose and cheeks were already freezing, while the skin of all his body chilled as it lost its blood.

21 But he was safe. Toes and nose and cheeks would be only touched by the frost, for the fire was beginning to burn with strength. He was feeding it with twigs the size of his finger. In another minute he would be able to feed it with branches the size of his wrist, and then he could remove his wet foot-gear, and, while it dried, he could keep his naked feet warm by the fire, rubbing them at first, of course, with snow. The fire was a success. He was safe. He remembered the advice of the old-timer on Sulphur Creek, and smiled. The old-timer had been very serious in laying down the law that no man must travel alone in the Klondike after fifty below. Well, here he was; he had had the accident; he was alone; and he had saved himself. Those old-timers were rather womanish,²² some of them, he thought. All a man had to do was to keep his head, and he was all right. Any man who was a man could travel alone. But it was surprising, the rapidity with which his cheeks and nose were freezing. And he had not thought his fingers could go lifeless in so short a time. Lifeless they were, for he could scarcely make them move together to grip a twig, and they seemed remote from his body and from him. When he touched a twig, he had to look and see whether or not he had hold of it. The wires were pretty well down between him and his finger-ends.

22 All of which counted for little. There was the fire, snapping and crackling and promising life with every dancing flame. He started to untie his moccasins. They were coated with ice; the thick German socks were like sheaths of iron half-way to the knees; and the moccasin strings were like rods of steel all twisted and knotted as by some conflagration²³. For a moment he tugged with his numbed fingers, then, realizing the folly of it, he drew his sheath-knife.

Sample Student Commentary

- ¹⁹ London has used this word before to the same effect. This time, however, the foe is the Universe itself.
- ²⁰ Blow continues the sense of combat.
- ²¹ Nicely ambiguous. Literally, the cold is "fearful," having instilled a sense of fear in the man. In the context of this paragraph, it also advances the combat motif—the sense that Nature is an armed and menacing foe.
- ²² Literally, this would be an anatomical or physiological assessment. Connotatively, it brings to mind whatever traits are stereotypically attributed to women. The precise intent of the adjective is, of course, determined by the time and place of its use. London's dismissal of the Old-Timers' fears is based on turn-of-the-twentieth-century notions of "womanhood", quite different from our twenty-first-century ideas.
- ²³ A conflagration is a large, damaging fire. In this sentence, it is part of a simile to describe the hard and twisted condition of the moccasin strings. Its use, here, is doubly ironic. First, the damage to the moccasin strings has been caused by a cold so severe it is nearly the opposite of a conflagration; and the point of the story is the man's attempt to build a fire.

23

But before he could cut the strings, it happened. It was his own fault or, rather, his mistake. He should not have built the fire under the spruce tree. He should have built it in the open. But it had been easier to pull the twigs from the brush and drop them directly on the fire. Now the tree under which he had done this carried a weight of snow on its boughs. No wind had blown for weeks, and each bough was fully freighted.²⁴ Each time he had pulled a twig he had communicated a slight agitation²⁵ to the tree—an imperceptible agitation²⁶, so far as he was concerned, but an agitation²⁷ sufficient to bring about the disaster. High up in the tree one bough capsized²⁸ its load of snow. This fell on the boughs beneath, capsizing them. This process continued, spreading out and involving the whole tree. It grew like an avalanche, and it descended without warning upon the man and the fire, and the fire was blotted²⁹ out! Where it had burned was a mantle of fresh and disordered snow.

24

The man was shocked. It was as though he had just heard his own sentence of death. For a moment he sat and stared at the spot where the fire had been. Then he grew very calm. Perhaps the old-timer on Sulphur Creek was right. If he had only had a trail-mate he would have been in no danger now. The trail-mate could have built the fire. Well, it was up to him to build the fire over again, and this second time there must be no failure. Even if he succeeded, he would most likely lose some toes. His feet must be badly frozen by now, and there would be some time before the second fire was ready.

25

Such were his thoughts, but he did not sit and think them. He was busy all the time they were passing through his mind, he made a new foundation for a fire, this time in the open; where no iracherous³⁰ tree could blot it out. Next, he gathered dry grasses and tiny twigs from the high-water floisam.³¹ He could not bring his fingers together to pull them out, but he was able to gather them by the handful. In this way he got many rotten twigs and bits of green moss that were undesirable, but it was the best he could do. He

Sample Student Commentary

- ²⁴ A pun, a play on the fact that freight and weight rhyme. Freight, however, connotes a load or a burden that is not necessarily suggested by weight.
- ²⁵ One of the denotations of communicate is to cause to pass from one to another, like a communicable disease.
- ²⁶ An obsolete denotation of agitate is to cause motion. Remember when London lived and wrote; this definition is quite possibly what he intended. That agitate also connotes unease or distress contributes to London's overall mood of impending calamity.
- ²⁷ This is the third repetition of agitation at the end of three successive clauses. This is a rhetorical device called epistrophe. Repeating this word emphasizes both the fact that the slight motion is moving from one bough to another and the sense of foreboding.
- ²⁸ This word's association with boats is purely connotative, but this connotation contributes to the sense of drenching that will result from this accident.
- ²⁹ Ironically, to blot means literally to make dry by soaking up excess fluid (like blotting up a spill with a paper towel). London's unconventional use of this word emphasizes the way the fire is drenched by the falling snow.
- ³⁰ The use of this one word serves London several purposes. It is a strong example of the pathetic fallacy, ascribing human attributes to things in nature. It also provides London with an opportunity to exhibit his Naturalist's disavowal of Romantic philosophy. While the Romantics argued that Nature was benevolent, the Naturalists believed in a neutral or amoral Nature.
- ³¹ This is a literal use of the word, and it emphasizes the motif of water and wetness.

worked methodically, even collecting an armful of the larger branches to be used later when the fire gathered strength. And all the while the dog sat and watched him, a certain yearning wistfulness in its eyes, for it looked upon him as the fire-provider, and the fire was slow in coming.

26 When all was ready, the man reached in his pocket for a second piece of birch-bark. He knew the bark was there, and, though he could not feel it with his fingers, he could hear its crisp rustling as he fumbled for it. Try as he would, he could not clutch hold of it. And all the time, in his consciousness, was the knowledge that each instant his feet were freezing. This thought tended to put him in a panic, but he fought against it and kept calm. He pulled on his mittens with his teeth, and threshed his arms back and forth, beating his hands with all his might against his sides. He did this sitting down, and he stood up to do it; and all the while the dog sat in the snow, its wolf-brush of a tail curled around warmly over its forefeet, its sharp wolf-ears pricked forward intently as it watched the man. And the man as he beat and threshed with his arms and hands, felt a great surge of envy as he regarded the creature that was warm and secure in its natural covering.

27 After a time he was aware of the first far-away signals of sensation in his beaten fingers. The faint tingling grew stronger till it evolved into a stinging ache that was excruciating, but which the man hailed with satisfaction. He stripped the mitten from his right hand and fetched forth the birch-bark. The exposed fingers were quickly going numb again. Next he brought out his bunch of sulphur matches. But the tremendous cold had already driven the life out of his fingers. In his effort to separate one match from the others, the whole bunch fell in the snow. He tried to pick it out of the snow, but failed. The dead³² fingers could neither touch nor clutch. He was very careful. He drove the thought of his freezing feet; and nose, and cheeks, out of his mind, devoting his whole soul³³ to the matches. He watched, using the sense of vision in place of that of touch, and when he saw his fingers on each side the bunch, he closed them—that is, he willed to close them, for the wires were drawn, and the fingers did not obey. He pulled the mitten on the right hand, and beat it fiercely against his knee. Then, with both mittened hands, he scooped the bunch of matches, along with much snow, into his lap. Yet he was no better off.

28 After some manipulation he managed to get the bunch between the heels of his mittened hands. In this fashion he carried it to his mouth. The ice cracked and snapped when by a violent effort he opened his mouth. He drew the lower jaw in, curled the upper lip out of the way, and scraped the bunch with his upper teeth in order to separate a match. He succeeded in getting one, which he dropped on his lap. He was no better off. He could not pick it up. Then he devised a way. He picked it up in his teeth and scratched it on his leg. Twenty times he scratched before he succeeded in lighting it. As it flamed he held it with his teeth to the birch-bark. But the burning brimstone went up

Sample Student Commentary

³² The fingers, of course, are not literally dead, but London uses this word to advance the foreboding sense of impending death that he started in the opening passage of the story.

³³ For a Naturalist to refer to the human soul is ironic. However, since the man's life depends on his lighting the matches, this simple act could be interpreted as having religious significance.

his nostrils and into his lungs, causing him to cough spasmodically. The match fell into the snow and went out.

29 The old-timer on Sulphur Creek was right, he thought in the moment of controlled despair that ensued: after fifty below, a man should travel with a partner. He beat his hands, but failed in exciting any sensation. Suddenly he bared both hands, removing the mittens with his teeth. He caught the whole bunch between the heels of his hands. His arm-muscles not being frozen enabled him to press the hand-heels tightly against the matches. Then he scratched the bunch along his leg. It flared into flame, seventy sulphur matches at once! There was no wind to blow them out. He kept his head to one side to escape the strangling fumes,³⁴ and held the blazing bunch to the birch-bark. As he so held it, he became aware of sensation in his hand. His flesh was burning. He could smell it. Deep down below the surface he could feel it. The sensation developed into pain that grew acute. And still he endured it, holding the flame of the matches clumsily to the bark that would not light readily because his own burning hands were in the way, absorbing most of the flame.

30 At last, when he could endure no more, he jerked his hands apart. The blazing matches fell sizzling into the snow, but the birch-bark was alight. He began laying dry grasses and the tiniest twigs on the flame. He could not pick and choose, for he had to lift the fuel between the heels of his hands. Small pieces of rotten wood and green moss clung to the twigs, and he bit them off as well as he could with his teeth. He cherished the flame³⁵ carefully and awkwardly. It meant life, and it must not perish. The withdrawal of blood from the surface of his body now made him begin to shiver, and he grew more awkward. A large piece of green moss fell squarely on the little fire. He tried to poke it out with his fingers, but his shivering frame made him poke too far, and he disrupted the nucleus of the little fire, the burning grasses and tiny twigs separating and scattering. He tried to poke them together again, but in spite of the intensity³⁶ of the effort, his shivering got away with him, and the twigs were hopelessly scattered. Each twig gushed a puff of smoke³⁷ and went out. The fire-provider had failed. As he looked apathetically about him, his eyes chanced on the dog, sitting across the ruins of the fire from him, in the snow, making restless, hunching movements, slightly lifting one forefoot and then the other, shifting its weight back and forth on them with wistful eagerness.

31 The sight of the dog put a wild idea into his head. He remembered the tale of the man, caught in a blizzard, who killed a steer and crawled inside the carcass, and so was saved.

Sample Student Commentary

³⁴ Literally, fumes cannot strangle, but this word provides a much more vivid image than other words London could have chosen.

³⁵ A lesser-known dictionary entry for cherish is to keep or cultivate with care and affection. Clearly, London is using the word literally in this case, but as with several of London's other word choices, cherish presents the reader with a vivid image of the man's tending his tiny fire as well as an emotional appreciation for the value of that fire.

³⁶ Anyone who has ever concentrated over a difficult task can appreciate London's unconventional use of the word tense.

³⁷ Gush is generally associated with fluids, not vapors. It does, however, provide another vivid image of the smoke from the extinguished fire and continues the water/drenching motif.

He would kill the dog and bury his hands in the warm body until the numbness went out of them. Then he could build another fire. He spoke to the dog, calling it to him, but in his voice was a strange note of fear that frightened the animal, who had never known the man to speak in such way before. Something was the matter, and its suspicious nature sensed danger—it knew not what danger but somewhere, somehow, in its brain arose an apprehension of the man. It flattened its ears down at the sound of the man's voice, and its restless, hunching movements and the liftings and shiftings of its forefeet became more pronounced but it would not come to the man. He got on his hands and knees and crawled toward the dog. This unusual posture again excited suspicion, and the animal sidled mincingly away.

32 The man sat up in the snow for a moment and struggled for calmness. Then he pulled on his mittens, by means of his teeth, and got upon his feet. He glanced down at first in order to assure himself that he was really standing up, for the absence of sensation in his feet left him unrelated to the earth³⁸. His erect position in itself started to drive the webs of suspicion from the dog's mind; and when he spoke peremptorily, with the sound of whip-lashes in his voice, the dog rendered its customary allegiance and came to him. As it came within reaching distance, the man lost his control. His arms flashed out to the dog, and he experienced genuine surprise when he discovered that his hands could not clutch, that there was neither bend nor feeling in the fingers. He had forgotten for the moment that they were frozen and that they were freezing more and more. All this happened quickly, and before the animal could get away, he encircled its body with his arms. He sat down in the snow, and in this fashion held the dog, while it snarled and whined and struggled.

33 But it was all he could do, hold its body encircled in his arms and sit there. He realized that he could not kill the dog. There was no way to do it. With his helpless hands he could neither draw nor hold his sheath-knife nor throttle the animal. He released it, and it plunged³⁹ wildly away, with tail between its legs, and still snarling. It halted forty feet away and surveyed him curiously, with ears sharply pricked forward. The man looked down at his hands in order to locate them, and found them hanging on the ends of his arms. It struck him as curious that one should have to use his eyes in order to find out where his hands were. He began threshing his arms back and forth, beating the mittened hands against his sides. He did this for five minutes, violently, and his heart pumped enough blood up to the surface to put a stop to his shivering. But no sensation was aroused in the hands. He had an impression that they hung like weights on the ends of his arms, but when he tried to run the impression down, he could not find it.

34 A certain fear of death, dull and oppressive, came to him. This fear quickly became poignant as he realized that it was no longer a mere matter of freezing his fingers and toes, or of losing his hands and feet, but that it was a matter of life and death with the

chances against him. This threw him into a panic, and he turned and ran up the creek-bed along the old, dim trail. The dog joined in behind and kept up with him. He ran blindly, without intention, in fear such as he had never known in his life. Slowly, as he ploughed and floundered⁴⁰ through the snow, he began to see things again—the banks of the creek, the old timber-jams, the leafless aspens, and the sky. The running made him feel better. He did not shiver. Maybe, if he ran on, his feet would thaw out; and, anyway, if he ran far enough, he would reach camp and the boys. Without doubt he would lose some fingers and toes and some of his face; but the boys would take care of him, and save the rest of him when he got there. And at the same time there was another thought in his mind that said he would never get to the camp and the boys; that it was too many miles away, that the freezing had too great a start on him, and that he would soon be stiff and dead. This thought he kept in the background and refused to consider. Sometimes it pushed itself forward and demanded to be heard, but he thrust it back and strove to think of other things.

35 It struck him as curious⁴¹ that he could run at all on feet so frozen that he could not feel them when they struck the earth and took the weight of his body. He seemed to himself to skim along above the surface and to have no connection with the earth. Somewhere he had once seen a winged Mercury, and he wondered if Mercury felt as he felt when skimming over the earth.

36 His theory of running until he reached camp and the boys had one flaw in it: he lacked the endurance. Several times he stumbled, and finally he tottered, crumpled up, and fell. When he tried to rise, he failed. He must sit and rest, he decided, and next time he would merely walk and keep on going. As he sat and regained his breath, he noted that he was feeling quite warm and comfortable. He was not shivering, and it even seemed that a warm glow had come to his chest and trunk. And yet, when he touched his nose or cheeks, there was no sensation. Running would not thaw them out. Nor would it thaw out his hands and feet. Then the thought came to him that the frozen portions of his body must be extending. He tried to keep this thought down, to forget it, to think of something else; he was aware of the panicky feeling that it caused, and he was afraid of the panic. But the thought asserted itself, and persisted, until it produced a vision of his body totally frozen. This was too much, and he made another wild run along the trail. Once he slowed down to a walk, but the thought of the freezing extending itself made him run again.

37 And all the time the dog ran with him, at his heels. When he fell down a second time, it curled its tail over its forefeet and sat in front of him facing him curiously eager and intent. The warmth and security of the animal angered him, and he cursed it till it flattened down its ears appealingly. This time the shivering came more quickly upon the man. He was losing in his battle with the frost. It was creeping into his body from all

Sample Student Commentary

⁴⁰ Compare the image of the active, energetic, and intentional plunging with the type of motion suggested by these verbs.

⁴¹ Another literal but lesser-known use. This use suggests both the oddness of the man's being able to run and his sense of wonder at the ability.

Sample Student Commentary

³⁸ Unrelated is another ambiguous word, suggesting that the man is not only disoriented, but also no longer a part of earth's family—estranged from earth.

³⁹ This is London's second use of this word in this story. The first use described the man's movement; this one describes the dog's.

sides. The thought of it drove him on, but he ran no more than a hundred feet, when he staggered and pitched headlong. It was his last panic. When he had recovered his breath and control, he sat up and entertained in his mind the conception of meeting death with dignity. However, the conception did not come to him in such terms. His idea of it was that he had been making a fool of himself, running around like a chicken with its head cut off—such was the simile that occurred to him. Well, he was bound to freeze anyway, and he might as well take it decently. With this new-found peace of mind came the first glimmerings of drowsiness. A good idea, he thought, to sleep off to death. It was like taking an anaesthetic. Freezing was not so bad as people thought. There were lots worse ways to die.

38 He pictured the boys finding his body next day. Suddenly he found himself with them, coming along the trail and looking for himself. And, still with them, he came around a turn in the trail and found himself lying in the snow. He did not belong with himself any more, for even then he was out of himself, standing with the boys and looking at himself in the snow. It certainly was cold, was his thought. When he got back to the States he could tell the folks what real cold was. He drifted on from this to a vision of the old-timer on Sulphur Creek. He could see him quite clearly, warm and comfortable, and smoking a pipe.

39 "You were right, old hoss; you were right," the man mumbled to the old-timer of Sulphur Creek.

40 Then the man drowsed off into what seemed to him the most comfortable and satisfying sleep he had ever known. The dog sat facing him and waiting. The brief day drew to a close in a long, slow twilight. There were no signs of a fire to be made, and, besides, never in the dog's experience had it known a man to sit like that in the snow and make no fire. As the twilight drew on, its eager yearning for the fire mastered it, and with a great lifting and shifting of forefeet, it whined softly, then flattened its ears down in anticipation of being chidden by the man. But the man remained silent. Later, the dog whined loudly. And still later it crept close to the man and caught the scent of death. This made the animal bristle and back away. A little longer it delayed, howling under the stars that leaped and danced and shone brightly in the cold sky. Then it turned and trotted up the trail in the direction of the camp it knew, where were the other food-providers and fire-providers.

Sample Multiple-Choice Questions

1. Yet the sun was too far south on its winter journey to clear the horizon. The bulge of the earth intervened between it and Henderson Creek, where the man walked under a clear sky at noon and cast no shadow.

The cold of space smote the unprotected tip of the planet, and he, being on that unprotected tip, received the full force of the blow.

Sentences like the above help to establish London as a writer of what movement?

- A. Naturalism
- B. Realism
- C. Romanticism
- D. Modernism
- E. Transcendentalism

2. London's word choice can best be described as

- A. precise and scientific.
- B. poetic.
- C. equivocal.
- D. unclear.
- E. simple and direct.

3. Which of the following contributes most to the vividness of the image in which it is used?

- A. intangible pall (paragraph 1)
- B. dead fingers (paragraph 27)
- C. crypts (paragraph 13)
- D. *cherish* (paragraph 30)
- E. gushed a puff (paragraph 30)

4. What does the passage suggest is the most important distinction between the man and the dog?

- A. *The man has lost touch with natural law that still governs the dog's behavior.*
- B. The man has reason and knowledge while the dog has instinct.
- C. The man is foolish while the dog is wise.
- D. The man is better able to provide for their needs than the dog is.
- E. The man is a creature of civilization while the dog is a creature of nature.

5. All of the following contribute to a motif of water, drenching, or drowning EXCEPT

- A. plunged. (paragraphs 5 and 33)
- B. capsized. (paragraph 23)
- C. flotsam. (paragraph 25)
- D. gushed. (paragraph 30)
- E. crystallized. (paragraph 7)

Answers and Explanations:

1. Since this question specifies the sentences on which students are to base their answers, it does not require outside knowledge of London as much as it does knowledge of the definitions and characteristics of the various literary movements. The two sentences provided both suggest the individual man's placement in a natural universe and the impact of that universe on his condition. (B) might tempt some students, but Realism tends to focus more on social forces than natural ones. (C) is eliminated by the realization that, in both sentences, Nature is neither benevolent nor malevolent; it just is. (D) is also eliminated because, aside from some unconventional word use, there is no evidence that London is challenging any of the traditional devices of storytelling. (E), like (C) can be eliminated by the realization that the sentences depict neither a benevolent nature nor a perfectible man. The sentences do, however, present scientific facts about the position of the sun relative to the earth and the impact of that astronomical relationship on the life of this individual man on earth. **Thus, (A) is the correct answer.**
2. (A) might tempt some because of the conventions of Naturalism in which the writer clearly places his character in an environment governed by natural laws that are neither good nor bad but neutral. (B) is fairly easily eliminated because, although London uses a good deal of vivid imagery, and his word choice is careful and sometimes unconventional, it is not as unconventional as might be considered "poetic." (D) is tempting if that is how one understands *ambiguous*, but the words London uses that have double meanings often contribute to his most vivid images and suggest levels of meaning. They do not tend to create a lack of clarity. (E) might also tempt some, but it does not address London's many unconventional and ambiguous word choices. Equivocal, however, denotes the fact of a message's being interpreted in more than one way. Its association with deception is a connotation. **Thus, in this case, (C) is the best answer.**
3. While (A) is a noun phrase, and London is employing a somewhat non-literal sense of *pall*, this phrase is not an image. Similarly, (B) describes the fingers' sensation of numbness, not their appearance. (C) is also a non-literal use but not an image. (E) is indeed an image of the movement of the smoke, but it is not the most vivid of the choices. (D), however, in that it is a verb with multiple meanings—literally, tending the fire carefully and deeply loving the life-saving fire. The single word, *cherish*, conveys a clear image of how the man is handling the fuel and blowing on the flames. **Thus, (D) is the best answer.**

4. (B) is not incorrect, but the simple fact of reason versus knowledge is not sufficient. London does much in the story to evaluate the distinction between human reason and animal instinct. (C) is probably the most tempting of the incorrect answers because the man is indeed foolish and, on the surface, the dog appears wise. Part of London's Naturalist theme, however, is that animals are not driven by human attributes like reason or wisdom; they are driven by natural instinct. (D) is clearly incorrect, as the man fails to provide the second fire. (E) might also tempt some because a large part of the man's failure is the result of his relying on reason and understanding, but London was a Naturalist, and there are several times in the story when he illustrates that humans, too, are part of Nature and subject to Nature's laws. (A), however, is almost a close modification of (E). As London suggests when he writes "the absence of sensation in his feet left him unrelated to the earth," and he seemed "to have no connection with the earth," it is not the case that the man is not a part of Nature but that he has lost contact with the Nature of which he is a part. **Thus, (A) is the best answer.**
5. The most familiar denotation of *plunge* (A) is to run or dive into water. Likewise, to *capsize* (B) connotes the turning over of a boat. *Floesam* (C) is the debris that floats on top of water and is left behind after a flood recedes or the tide goes out. To *gush* is a verb usually connoted with a heavy or rapid jet of fluid. Only (E) is not necessarily associated with water. While, in this story, the crystals are indeed frozen water vapor, the word more readily connotes gems or sugar crystals in confections. **Thus, (E) is the best answer.**



Remember, we will provide you with an example of each type of writing prompt—text-based and independent—but the actual AP exam will never contain two essays about the same piece of literature.

Sample free-response item one (text-based):

Carefully read Jack London's "To Build a Fire." Then write a well-reasoned and well-supported essay in which you analyze London's word choice and show how his diction contributes to his imagery and helps to establish the overall mood of the story.

The mood of Jack's London's story, "To Build a Fire," is somber.¹ It is, after all, a story of death, and from the beginning, London foreshadows the man's death. This foreshadowing is very subtle, however. On the surface, while the man faces harder and harder challenges, he never considers that he won't survive. It is through images of death and words related with death that London creates his mood.²

The first fact we learn is that the day is "cold and gray."³ While this phrase does not refer only to death, it is bleak and makes one think of the dead, maybe a dead body.⁴ Literally, this grayness is caused by the fact that the story takes place north of the Arctic Circle, and the sun will not rise above the horizon for several weeks. London goes on to describe the day. Even though it is clear and cloudless, it feels as if there is an "intangible pall"⁵ over the day. A "pall," of course, is a shroud, a sheet used to cover a dead body.⁶ London makes sure the reader gets the impression by saying that it was a "subtle gloom," and not the lack of sun, that made the day dark.⁷

London uses another death-related word when he describes the dog's instinct, a "mysterious prompting that arose from the deep crypts of its being." A "crypt" is a dark, underground chamber, especially one that holds corpses.

Suggestions of death appear also in the two times the man builds a fire. London has made it very clear that it is cold—very cold. When the man tries to eat his lunch, he first forgets to build a fire, and his "exposed" hands grow "numb" with a speed that frightens him. After his accident, however, the "numb" fingers become "lifeless,"⁸ and the suggestion that this man—now considerably behind schedule and

wet half-way up to his knees—is in danger, grave danger, and he might die.

Using the scientific language of a Naturalist, London explains why it is so cold. He tells the reader that the "lifeless" fingers are the result the man's blood, which is "alive," "recoiling" from the severe cold. Still, the man believes he is safe because he has succeeded in building a fire.

What happens next, London calls a "disaster." This is a strong word, both denotatively and connotatively. It is not open to too much interpretation. While an emergency or a crisis might be survived, "disaster" connotes death. London even tells us that the man "had heard his own death sentence."⁹ The "disaster," of course, is that the fire has been built under a snow-covered tree, which has dumped all of its snow and doused the fire. Again, London's word choice, even more than the events themselves, foreshadow the man's death. The tree does not merely dump the snow, each bough "capsizes" its snow. Literally, to "capsize" means to turn over, like a boat. To "capsize" means to completely disable the boat, and it carries with it a suggestion of panic and drowning. In the story, it is literally the fire that is drowned, but the suggestion that this "disaster" is going to result in the man's death is clear.

While the man attempts to build his second fire, London remarks, not only on the fingers' numbness, but he tells us, "the tremendous cold had already driven the life out of his fingers." In the next sentence, he describes the fingers as "dead." In a touch of irony, as London lists the parts of the body that are freezing, he steps up the tension by saying, he "devoted" his whole soul to the matches. On the one hand, London is simply stressing the fact that the man is focusing his entire being on the task of building a fire. After all, it is now a simple scientific fact that, without this fire, the man will die. On the other hand, however, the use the word "soul" at this point has to have some religious or spiritual importance. Religion teaches that death is when the soul leaves the body. Mention of the soul, then, especially in the context of listing the parts of the body that are dying, makes the fact of the man's approaching death almost obvious.

Once the fact that the man is probably going to die is made clear, London relies less on careful word choice and allows death to be apparent on the surface.¹⁰ The man thinks that, if he kills the dog, he can warm his hands inside the dog's carcass. But the fact is that he does not have the means to kill the dog. This is the point at which real panic takes over, and the man begins to act desperately and without thought.

In the final paragraph, however, London again returns to subtle and careful word choice. He never tells us that the man is dead. Instead, he tells us that the man falls into "the most comfortable and satisfying sleep he had ever known." While the man is clearly dying, London observes the progress of the sun just beneath the horizon: "The brief day drew to a close in a long, slow twilight."

Scorer Commentary

⁹ Here is an excellent discussion of a quotation.

¹⁰ Always this student remains true to the prompt—not what is the mood, but how is the mood conveyed?

Scorer Commentary

¹ It is appropriate to tell your reader what the mood is, but remember that the prompt does not ask you to analyze the mood.

² Here is the student's thesis, the statement that specifies the exact argument of this essay.

³ As with the previous essays in this book, you cannot hope to receive a top score without textual support.

⁴ You need the quotation, but you also must have discussion of the quotation.

⁵ Quotation.

⁶ Discussion of the quotation.

⁷ Further discussion...explain the relevance of the quotation to your thesis.

⁸ This student has done a good job identifying the key to this essay—the precise use of words that conveys the mood, not the mood itself.

The man is dead, and the dog runs away. The image of the twilight sky returns us back to the beginning of the story, where London described the bleak sky as a covering for the dead. All along, the mood of the story has been bleak like the sky. London has been hinting that the man was going to die. Death has been present in the story, almost like another character. But London never comes right out and says the man is going to die. His hints come in subtle and precise word choice. It is this word choice that makes this otherwise simple story so exciting.¹¹

Scorer Commentary

¹¹ The conclusion reminds us of the original issue assigned in the prompt. This is a very strong essay, focused, organized, and supported.

Sample free-response item two (independent):

The concrete is better than the abstract. The detail is better than the commonplace. The sensual is better than the intellectual. The visual is better than the mental.

—Ellen Hunnicutt

Consider the above quotation specifying some of the concerns that should govern a writer's word choice. Choose a novel, story, or play in which the author's choice of the "concrete," the "detail," the "sensual," and the "visual" is notable and makes a strong contribution to the piece's impact and meaning. Then write a well-organized essay in which you analyze the impact of the author's word choice.

You may choose a work from the list below or another novel, story, or play of comparable literary merit.

As Ellen Hunnicutt observed, in creative writing, concrete details are better than abstract commonplaces. Words that evoke sensory images are better than those that give us ideas, and what we can see is better than what we imagine. Jack London's Naturalist² short story "To Build a Fire" is a perfect example of how a writer's effective choice of concrete, sensory, and visual words helps to create a foreboding sense of the inevitable, while also maintaining the distant or objective tone typical of a Naturalist writer. Specifically, London's concrete and sensory word choice helps him describe the overall gloominess of the day, the

Scorer Commentary

¹ Again, restating the issue of the prompt in your own words can help you to start out with the right focus.

² The writers of the AP exam will assume you have some knowledge of genre, literary movement, and so on. So, even if it is not specifically demanded by the prompt, if this kind of literary knowledge is relevant to your essay, by all means, use it.

intense cold, and the process of death.³

An important factor in this story is the gloom of the day.⁴ The first sentence tells the reader—twice—that the day was "grey." While this is indeed a specific and visual word, it is still open to interpretation since a reader might assume that it is cloudy. To make certain his reader has a full and accurate understanding of the quality of the day, London gets even more detailed and concrete:

There was no sun nor hint of sun, though there was not a cloud in the sky. It was a clear day, and yet there seemed an intangible pall over the face of things, a subtle gloom that made the day dark, and that was due to the absence of sun.

"Not a cloud in the sky" is absolutely specific. While it doesn't explain why the day is grey, it does remove the inaccurate image the reader first got. "The absence of the sun" explains the gloom. We don't yet know why there is no sun, but an accurate reading can give the reader only a picture of a clear, cloudless, but sunless sky. Beyond the literal image, however, London also provides the evaluation of the image's impact. The greyness creates a "subtle gloom." While neither "subtle" nor "gloom" is concrete or very visual, the "pall" that the darkness casts on the day is. A "pall" is a shroud, the cloth in which dead bodies are wrapped for burial. It gives a specific name to the gloom, makes it the gloom of death.⁵

Once London establishes the physical darkness and the psychological gloom of the day, he goes on to tell his story. At noon of the day in the story, however, he pauses again to remind the reader that this is a dark, sunless day:

At twelve o'clock the day was at its brightest. Yet the sun was too far south on its winter journey to clear the horizon. The bulge of the earth intervened between it and Henderson Creek, where the man walked under a clear sky at noon and cast no shadow.

The sun's being "too far south...to clear the horizon" is probably an example of the intellectual language that is not as desirable as sensual language. "The bulge of the earth" is more visual and allows the reader to visualize the sun south of the equator so that it does not appear above the Arctic Circle. The phrase makes it absolutely clear how it can be a cloudless day and still there is no sun.

The final mention of the darkness comes at the end of the story, when the man dies. Rather than tell us explicitly that the man is dying, London says, "The brief day drew to a close in a long, slow twilight." So, the day broke "cold and grey" and ended "in a long, slow twilight." It had been a cloudless day, but it had been a short and dark day because the sun was south of the equator and the story takes place in the Arctic. These are concrete, detailed, visual facts that London provides to communicate to the reader the overall gloom of the story.

Scorer Commentary

³ After she has stated her essential argument, this student specifies the precise aspects of the story she is going to examine.

⁴ This is the first of the three aspects promised in the introduction.

⁵ Again, the absolutely essential quotation and explanation/discussion. Notice that the student has formatted this relatively long quotation as a block separated from the main body of the essay.

The first sentence of the story also communicates, not only that the day was grey, but that it was "cold_exceedingly cold."⁶ "Cold" is subject to interpretation, and "exceedingly cold" is not really any clearer. It is intellectual, not sensory, mental rather than visual. To make his reader's understanding of the cold more concrete, London provides the temperature, "Fifty degrees below zero," and even compares it to freezing temperature, which a reader should be able to understand, "eighty odd degrees of frost."

Even naming the temperature, however, might be considered too mental or intellectual,⁷ so London provides a few even clearer images of just how cold it is. First there is the man's beard. The moisture in his breath freezes and gives him a "muzzle of ice." This is definitely a concrete and visual image.

There is also the spittle from the man's chewing tobacco. Twice the man spits, and the spittle freezes before it even hits the ground. London writes:

[the man] spat speculatively. There was a sharp, explosive crackle that startled him. He spat again. And again, in the air, before it could fall to the snow, the spittle crackled. He knew that at fifty below spittle crackled on the snow, but this spittle had crackled in the air. Undoubtedly it was colder than fifty below—how much colder he did not know.

The "colder than fifty below" might not communicate anything meaningful to the reader, but the spittle freezing in mid-air gives us something to visualize. We know how cold it is, even if we have never experienced such cold.⁸

The cold, of course, is the cause of the man's death, which is foreshadowed by the grey gloom of the day. The process of the man's dying is another theme that London establishes using concrete, detailed, and visual language.⁹ The man does not begin his slow march to death until more than halfway through the story, when he falls through some ice and wets himself and then his life-saving fire is drenched by snow from a tree. The language London uses to explain the severe cold might sound mental, but it is really extremely visual: "The cold of space smote the unprotected tip of the planet, and he, being on that unprotected tip, received the full force of the blow." "Unprotected tip" is visual and calls to mind the man's exposed nose that was freezing earlier in the story. And the verb "to smite" raises images of knights fighting dragons. This story is no longer simply about a man in the cold, it is about a man being engaged in fierce combat by the cold. It is important that it is the "cold of space" that is smiting the earth. This makes the cold the victorious knight and the man the dragon to be defeated.¹⁰

Scorer Commentary

⁶ The coldness of the day is the second sub-topic promised in the introduction. Notice that this essay is organized by sub-topics and not by the chronology of the plot. The first discussion took the reader through the entire story, and this discussion now brings us back to the beginning.

⁷ This student is very careful not to stray too far from the prompt.

⁸ This is an effective combination of quotation, summary, and paraphrase, as well as original discussion.

⁹ This is the third sub-topic promised in the introduction.

¹⁰ The student carried her discussion to a full conclusion, drawing the conclusion for the reader, not leaving it up to speculation.

London continues the combat imagery. The next paragraph again might sound too scientific or mental to please Ellen Humnicutt, but London's words are much more visual than scientifically accurate. When the body is exposed to extreme cold, the blood does indeed withdraw into the body's core. The body can live without toes or fingers, even without feet and hands, or legs and arms; but if the heart or the lungs or any other vital organ freezes, the body dies.¹¹ But the blood cannot "recoil" as London says it does. "Recoil" is a vivid verb that calls to mind the image of the wounded dragon shrinking away from the smiting knight. This recoiling blood is "alive," and it finds the cold "fearful." This is personification and more concrete and visual than a simple statement that the man was freezing.

When the first fire is doused, and the man struggles to build a second one, London makes the struggle absolutely concrete when he describes, not only the numbness of the man's hands, but the fact that the fingers cannot grasp the twigs and kindling, and his shivering prevents him from laying the wood for the fire.¹²

The man is dying. He is cold, and his body is freezing. In the final paragraph, when there is no doubt that this story is about the man's death, London returns to pure imagery to describe rather than narrate the death. As is true of hypothermia, the man "drows[es] off into what seem[s] to him the most comfortable and satisfying sleep he ha[s] ever known." Then the focus shifts from the man altogether, and his death is clearly implied when London writes, "The brief day drew to a close in a long, slow twilight."¹³

The "brief day," the imagery of the overall gloom of the sunless, cloudless day has foreshadowed this death from the very beginning of the story. Now, the sun that has never really risen, is setting, and the cold, dark night is falling. And the man is dying.

As a Naturalist, London does rely on "mental" or scientific language to convey his theme, but he also effectively uses vivid, visual, and other sensory words to give that theme an emotional and psychological impact. "To Build a Fire" is a suspenseful and moving piece for all of London's supposedly neutral and scientific attitude.¹⁴

Scorer Commentary

¹¹ The student is drawing on her own prior knowledge, but she is safe as long as she stays on this general, factual level. If she were to stray into interpretation of scientific fact or evaluation of London's scientific knowledge, then she might risk losing her focus.

¹² Especially given the limited time and space for an on-demand exam essay, it would be pointless for the student to quote the lines in which this situation is described. This is a literal, factual summary and is sufficient for this purpose.

¹³ These are both metaphors rather than images, but the point is valid, and this has been a very strong essay up to now.

¹⁴ Again, the well-crafted conclusion reminds us of the student's original argument and establishes that she has not lost her focus.

Exercise Two:

Questions 6–10. Read the following passage and then choose the best answer to the multiple-choice questions that follow.

“A Mad Tea Party” from *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*

LEWIS CARROLL (1834–1898)

THE RE WAS A TABLE SET OUT under a tree in front of the house, and the March Hare¹ and the Hatter² were having tea at it: a Dormouse³ was sitting between them, fast asleep, and the other two were using it as a cushion, resting their elbows on it, and talking over its head. “Very uncomfortable for the Dormouse,” thought Alice; “only, as it’s asleep, I suppose it doesn’t mind.”

The table was a large one, but the three were all crowded together at one corner of it. “No room! No room!” they cried out when they saw Alice coming. “There’s plenty of room!” said Alice indignantly, and she sat down in a large arm-chair at one end of the table.

“Have some wine,” the March Hare said in an encouraging tone.

Alice looked all round the table, but there was nothing on it but tea. “I don’t see any wine,” she remarked.

“There isn’t any,” said the March Hare.

“Then it wasn’t very civil of you to offer it,” said Alice angrily.

“It wasn’t very civil of you to sit down without being invited,” said the March Hare.

“I didn’t know it was your table,” said Alice; “it’s laid for a great many more than three.”

“Your hair wants cutting,” said the Hatter. He had been looking at Alice for some time with great curiosity, and this was his first speech.

“You should learn not to make personal remarks,” Alice said with some severity; “it’s very rude.”

The Hatter opened his eyes very wide on hearing this; but all he said was, “Why is a raven like a writing-desk?”

“Come, we shall have some fun now!” thought Alice. “I’m glad they’ve begun asking riddles.—I believe I can guess that,” she added aloud.

“Do you mean that you think you can find out the answer to it?” said the March Hare.

“Exactly so,” said Alice.

¹ A hare is a rabbit-like rodent. To be “mad as a March hare,” was a common English expression presumably derived from the hare’s apparently strange behavior during the March breeding season.

² Notice that Carroll does not call this character “the Mad Hatter.” “Mad as a hatter” was another common expression in England. The exact origin of the expression is not known, but two possible explanations are that the mercury often used in making men’s hats occasionally resulted in madness and early death for men who followed the hatter’s trade and that the verb *hatter*, meaning “to harass or to make weary,” may have come to be used as a noun, a process known as “nominalization.” In an earlier chapter, the Cheshire Cat told Alice that the Hatter and the March Hare were both mad.

³ A very small rodent, mostly found in Europe, and known for its long periods of hibernation

“Then you should say what you mean,” the March Hare went on.

“I do,” Alice hastily replied; “at least—at least I mean what I say—that’s the same thing, you know.”

“Not the same thing a bit!” said the Hatter. “You might just as well say that ‘I see what I eat’ is the same thing as ‘I eat what I see!’”

“You might just as well say,” added the March Hare, “that ‘I like what I get’ is the same thing as ‘I get what I like!’”

“You might just as well say,” added the Dormouse, who seemed to be talking in his sleep, “that ‘I breathe when I sleep’ is the same thing as ‘I sleep when I breathe!’”

“It is the same thing with you,” said the Hatter, and here the conversation dropped, and the party sat silent for a minute, while Alice thought over all she could remember about ravens and writing-desks, which wasn’t much.

The Hatter was the first to break the silence. “What day of the month is it?” he said, turning to Alice: he had taken his watch out of his pocket, and was looking at it uneasily, shaking it every now and then, and holding it to his ear.

Alice considered a little, and then said “The fourth.”

“Two days wrong!” sighed the Hatter. “I told you butter wouldn’t suit the works!” he added looking angrily at the March Hare.

“It was the best butter,” the March Hare meekly replied.

“Yes, but some crumbs must have got in as well,” the Hatter grumbled: “you shouldn’t have put it in with the bread-knife.”

The March Hare took the watch and looked at it gloomily: then he dipped it into his cup of tea, and looked at it again: but he could think of nothing better to say than his first remark, “It was the best butter, you know.”

Alice had been looking over his shoulder with some curiosity. “What a funny watch!” she remarked. “It tells the day of the month, and doesn’t tell what o’clock it is!”

“Why should it?” muttered the Hatter. “Does your watch tell you what year it is?”

“Of course not,” Alice replied very readily: “but that’s because it stays the same year for such a long time together.”

“Which is just the case with mine,” said the Hatter.

Alice felt dreadfully puzzled. The Hatter’s remark seemed to have no sort of meaning in it, and yet it was certainly English. “I don’t quite understand you,” she said, as politely as she could.

“The Dormouse is asleep again,” said the Hatter, and he poured a little hot tea upon its nose.

The Dormouse shook its head impatiently, and said, without opening its eyes, “Of course, of course; just what I was going to remark myself.”

“Have you guessed the riddle yet?” the Hatter said, turning to Alice again.

“No, I give it up,” Alice replied: “what’s the answer?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea,” said the Hatter.

“Nor I,” said the March Hare.

Alice sighed wearily. “I think you might do something better with the time,” she said, “than waste it in asking riddles that have no answers.”¹

¹ The fact is, Lewis Carroll intended this riddle to have no answer. When pressed by readers for the solution, he created a few but always insisted that he never intended this riddle to have an answer.

"If you knew Time as well as I do," said the Hatter, "you wouldn't talk about wasting it. It's him."

"I don't know what you mean," said Alice.

"Of course you don't!" the Hatter said, tossing his head contemptuously. "I dare say you never even spoke to Time!"

"Perhaps not," Alice cautiously replied: "but I know I have to beat time when I learn music."

"Ah! that accounts for it," said the Hatter. "He won't stand beating. Now, if you only kept on good terms with him, he'd do almost anything you liked with the clock. For instance, suppose it were nine o'clock in the morning, just time to begin lessons: you'd only have to whisper a hint to Time, and round goes the clock in a twinkling! Half-past one, time for dinner!"

("I only wish it was," the March Hare said to itself in a whisper.)

"That would be grand, certainly," said Alice thoughtfully: "but then—I shouldn't be hungry for it, you know."

"Not at first, perhaps," said the Hatter: "but you could keep it to half-past one as long as you liked."

"Is that the way you manage?" Alice asked.

The Hatter shook his head mournfully. "Not I!" he replied. "We quarrelled last March—just before he went mad, you know—" (pointing with his tea spoon at the March Hare.)"—it was at the great concert given by the Queen of Hearts, and I had to sing

"Twinkle, twinkle, little bat!

How I wonder what you're at!"

You know the song, perhaps?"

"I've heard something like it," said Alice.

"It goes on, you know," the Hatter continued, "in this way:—

"Up above the world you fly,

Like a tea-tray in the sky.

Twinkle, twinkle—"

Here the Dormouse shook itself, and began singing in its sleep "Twinkle, twinkle, twinkle, twinkle—" and went on so long that they had to pinch it to make it stop.

"Well, I'd hardly finished the first verse," said the Hatter, "when the Queen jumped up and bawled out, 'He's murdering the time! Off with his head!'"

"How dreadfully savage!" exclaimed Alice.

"And ever since that," the Hatter went on in a mournful tone, "he won't do a thing I ask! It's always six o'clock now."

A bright idea came into Alice's head. "Is that the reason so many tea-things are put out here?" she asked.

"Yes, that's it," said the Hatter with a sigh: "it's always tea-time, and we've no time to wash the things between whiles."

"Then you keep moving round, I suppose?" said Alice.

"Exactly so," said the Hatter: "as the things get used up."

"But what happens when you come to the beginning again?" Alice ventured to ask.

"Suppose we change the subject," the March Hare interrupted, yawning. "I'm getting tired of this. I vote the young lady tells us a story."

"I'm afraid I don't know one," said Alice, rather alarmed at the proposal.

"Then the Dormouse shall!" they both cried. "Wake up, Dormouse!" And they pinched it on both sides at once.

The Dormouse slowly opened his eyes. "I wasn't asleep," he said in a hoarse, feeble voice: "I heard every word you fellows were saying."

"Tell us a story!" said the March Hare.

"Yes, please do!" pleaded Alice.

"And be quick about it," added the Hatter, "or you'll be asleep again before it's done."

"Once upon a time there were three little sisters," the Dormouse began in a great hurry; "and their names were Elsie, Lacie, and Tillie; and they lived at the bottom of a well—"

"What did they live on?" said Alice, who always took a great interest in questions of eating and drinking.

"They lived on treacle," said the Dormouse, after thinking a minute or two.

"They couldn't have done that, you know," Alice gently remarked; "they'd have been ill."

"So they were," said the Dormouse; "very ill."

Alice tried to fancy to herself what such an extraordinary way of living would be like, but it puzzled her too much, so she went on: "But why did they live at the bottom of a well?"

"Take some more tea," the March Hare said to Alice, very earnestly.

"I've had nothing yet," Alice replied in an offended tone, "so I can't take more."

"You mean you can't take less," said the Hatter: "it's very easy to take more than nothing."

"Nobody asked your opinion," said Alice.

"Who's making personal remarks now?" the Hatter asked triumphantly.

Alice did not quite know what to say to this: so she helped herself to some tea and bread-and-butter, and then turned to the Dormouse, and repeated her question. "Why did they live at the bottom of a well?"

The Dormouse again took a minute or two to think about it, and then said, "It was a treacle-well."

"There's no such thing!" Alice was beginning very angrily, but the Hatter and the March Hare went "Sh! sh!" and the Dormouse sulkily remarked, "If you can't be civil, you'd better finish the story for yourself."

"No, please go on!" Alice said very humbly: "I won't interrupt again. I dare say there may be one."

"One, indeed!" said the Dormouse indignantly. However, he consented to go on. "And so these three little sisters—they were learning to draw, you know—"

"What did they draw?" said Alice, quite forgetting her promise.

"Treacle," said the Dormouse, without considering at all this time.

"I want a clean cup," interrupted the Hatter: "let's all move one place on."

He moved on as he spoke, and the Dormouse followed him: the March Hare moved into the Dormouse's place, and Alice rather unwillingly took the place of the March Hare. The

Hatter was the only one who got any advantage from the change: and Alice was a good deal worse off than before, as the March Hare had just upset the milk-jug into his plate.

Alice did not wish to offend the Dormouse again, so she began very cautiously: "But I don't understand. Where did they draw the treacle from?"

"You can draw water out of a water-well," said the Hatter; "so I should think you could draw treacle out of a treacle-well—eh, stupid?"

"But they were in the well," Alice said to the Dormouse, not choosing to notice this last remark.

"Of course they were," said the Dormouse; "—well in."

This answer so confused poor Alice, that she let the Dormouse go on for some time without interrupting it.

"They were learning to draw," the Dormouse went on, yawning and rubbing its eyes, for it was getting very sleepy; "and they drew all manner of things—everything that begins with an M—"

"Why with an M?" said Alice.

"Why not?" said the March Hare.

Alice was silent.

The Dormouse had closed its eyes by this time, and was going off into a doze; but, on being pinched by the Hatter, it woke up again with a little shriek, and went on: "—that begins with an M, such as mouse-traps, and the moon, and memory, and muchness—you know you say things are 'muchness'—did you ever see such a thing as a drawing of a muchness?"

"Really, now you ask me," said Alice, very much confused, "I don't think—"

"Then you shouldn't talk," said the Hatter.

This piece of rudeness was more than Alice could bear: she got up in great disgust, and walked off; the Dormouse fell asleep instantly, and neither of the others took the least notice of her going, though she looked back once or twice, half hoping that they would call after her: the last time she saw them, they were trying to put the Dormouse into the teapot.

"At any rate I'll never go there again!" said Alice as she picked her way through the wood. "It's the stupidest tea-party I ever was at in all my life!"

¹ A common phrase in Great Britain that means two things are so similar as to be virtually indistinguishable

Multiple-Choice Questions 6-10:

6. In this passage, the March Hare's and the Hatter's "madness" is primarily the result of a/h

- A. lack of commonly-accepted social manners.
- B. inattention to dialectical differences.
- C. application of cultural stereotypes and archetypes.
- D. strict adherence to literal meanings.
- E. total disregard for denotation and accepted convention.

7. In this passage, Lewis Carroll uses language primarily to

- A. clarify and defend.
- B. instruct and enlighten.
- C. challenge and dispute.
- D. confuse and perplex.
- E. amuse and delight.

8. On a thematic level, this passage most likely illustrates the

- A. basic incivility of people.
- B. insufficiency of language.
- C. willfulness of young girls.
- D. comic possibilities of caricature.
- E. complexities of human emotion.

9. The play on the word *draw* in the Dormouse's story is based on the words' being

- A. homonyms.
- B. homophones.
- C. homographs.
- D. synonyms.
- E. antonyms.

10. All of the following contribute to the comedy of this passage EXCEPT

- A. stereotype.
- B. misperception.
- C. slapstick.
- D. non sequitur.
- E. word play.

Free-response item 3 (text-based)

Carefully read "A Mad Tea Party" from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and then write a thoughtful, well-supported essay in which you analyze the ways in which Carroll uses wordplay, ambiguity, and other quirks of language to create an illusion of madness and illogic. Do not merely summarize the plot of the selection.

Before you write your essay:

1. Make sure you understand exactly what you're being asked to write about.
 - List all of the verbs in the prompt.
 - Underline the verb that describes the essay.
 - Write the direct object of that verb.
2. Make sure you have something valid to write about.
 - Write a sentence or two that make a positive and focused statement about the topic.
 - Make sure these sentences address all of the issues and subpoints specified in the prompt.
3. Review the selection and find your textual support.
4. Write your essay.
 - Keep referring to the prompt and whatever you underlined or highlighted in the selection to make sure you're on track and addressing everything the prompt wants you to address.

Free-response item 4 (independent)

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) wrote, "Neurosis is the inability to tolerate ambiguity." This notion of madness—a rational individual's inability to understand or adapt to the apparently irrational—is a common theme in Western literature. Think of a novel or play in which the theme or conflict is based on something like Freud's definition of neurosis. Then, write a well-organized and reasoned essay in which you analyze the role of madness in the overall meaning of the work. Do not merely summarize the plot of the novel or play.

Before you write your essay:

1. Make sure you understand exactly what you're being asked to write about.
 - List all of the verbs in the prompt.
 - Underline the verb that describes the essay.
 - Write the direct object of that verb.
2. Choose an appropriate selection.

Actually, because you're using this book, your teacher probably wants you to write your essay on whatever story, article, or poem, etc., the writing prompt follows.
3. Make sure you have something to say about both the topic and your selected literature.
 - Jot down key plot events
 - Think in terms of plot structure: rising action, climax, falling action, and so on.
 - List characters
 - Think in terms of function or role—protagonist or antagonist
 - Think in terms of type—hero, anti-hero, foil, clown, etc.

4. Make sure you jot down notes that pertain to the assigned topic.

- Jot down quotations or at least close paraphrases.
 - Jot down everything you know and remember about the assigned topic.
5. Make sure you are clear about what you are going to say.
- Write a sentence or two that make a positive and focused statement about the topic.
 - Make sure these sentences address all of the issues and subpoints specified in the prompt.

6. Write your essay. ↻

Issues of Interpretation and Inference

There is a common misperception about topics that are open to multiple interpretations. Many people—many intelligent and educated people—mistakenly believe that if something is open to a number of interpretations, *none* of those interpretations can be wrong. A similar misperception is that all possible interpretations are equally valid.

You may even accept those two misperceptions and are right now planning the letter you are going to write to argue with us—so let's examine a few examples.

Consider the first stanza of a famous poem by Scottish poet Robert Burns:

O, my love is like a red, red rose,
That is newly sprung in June.
O, my love is like the melody,
That is sweetly played in tune.

Certainly, the similes are open to interpretation. In what way(s) is Burns's love like a rose, specifically a red rose? Is she like a rose because she, too, is red? Burns goes on to say that this rose was "newly sprung in June," so perhaps his love is young, like a new June rose. Roses are generally regarded as beautiful, so perhaps Burns simply means that his love is beautiful.

Perhaps he means some combination of these—or all of these, plus a few we have not mentioned yet.