

# AP Literature

## Summer Reading Assignment - Novel

### Select ONE of the following:

- *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver
- *The Underground Railroad\** by Colson Whitehead
- *All the Light We Cannot See* by Anthony Doerr
- *There There\** by Tommy Orange
- *Sing, Unburied, Sing\** by Jesmyn Ward

\*Content Warning. The text contains graphic scenes of violence (sexual and/or physical).

Novels were carefully chosen with the following in mind:

- work of literary merit (all Pulitzer Prize winner and/or finalists or National Book Award winner)
- relevant themes and insightful exploration into the nature of humanity
- potential novel for Q3 open essay question on the AP Literature exam

Below are the themes, motifs, and symbols you should consider in your novel of choice. You are not required to annotate, but pay attention to these literary elements as you read. After reading the novel in its entirety, answer the **questions**. Each response should be a solid, well-written paragraph (approximately ½ - 1 page each). While you don't *need* to cite from the text in your response, you may if you feel it would add development to your insights.

### The Poisonwood Bible by Barbara Kingsolver

#### **Themes:**

1. Gender roles, women and femininity, sexism
2. Cultural arrogance and ignorance of Western people, imperialism
3. Worship of nature as a form of religious faith
4. Global injustice - inevitable or preventable?
5. Individuals experience and deal with guilt differently

#### **Motifs and symbols:**

- Vision/sight
- Light and dark
- Language
- Methuselah the parrot
- The demonstration garden
- Poisonwood tree

#### **Questions:**

1. How does each daughter's own linguistic personality mirror her deeper personality?
2. The sisters refer repeatedly to balance (and, by implication, imbalance). What kinds of balance—including historical, political, and social—emerge as important? Are individual characters associated with specific kinds of balance or imbalance? Do any of the sisters have a final say on the importance of balance?

3. Why do you suppose that Reverend Nathan Price is not given a voice of his own? Do we learn from his wife and daughters enough information to formulate an adequate explanation for his beliefs and behavior? Does such an explanation matter?
4. How does Kingsolver present the double themes of captivity and freedom and of love and betrayal? What kinds of captivity and freedom does she explore? What kinds of love and betrayal? What are the causes and consequences of each kind of captivity, freedom, love, and betrayal?
5. At Bikoki Station, in 1965, Leah reflects, "I still know what justice is." Does she? What concept of justice does each member of the Price family and other characters (Anatole, for example) hold? Do you have a sense, by the novel's end, that any true justice has occurred?
6. How is America's role in the novel portrayed? Do you agree or disagree with this portrayal?

## **The Underground Railroad by Colson Whitehead**

### ***Themes:***

1. Reality of the horrors of slavery & the evil brought out by the poisonous mechanics of slavery
2. Distortions of the American Dream
3. Belonging – family, heritage, and home
4. Literacy as a form of freedom
5. Importance of trust and dangers of betrayal

### ***Motifs and symbols:***

- Cora's plot of land
- Hob
- Magical realism
- Freedom Trail
- The museum, Living History
- Commodification, slavery as an economic system

### ***Questions:***

1. Consider the purpose of rendering the Underground Railroad as an actual physical railroad.
2. How does every state Cora goes through as she runs north represent a different state of American possibility? How does the book reboot every time she goes to a different state?
3. How is this book psychologically realistic in regards to emotional trauma?
4. Evaluate how Cora is an "insurrection of one," and decide why her resistance makes her such a threat to the system of white supremacy.
5. Critique the significance of how each person who worked on the Railroad—from station agents to conductors—were affected by their work. How is each person a reflection of what awaits Cora in the next part of their journey? In what ways, also, do these people understand resistance, agency, and responsibility?
6. Analyze Lander's response to Mingo: "Sometimes a useful delusion is better than a useless truth." He then lists and explains examples of delusions: "that we can escape slavery," "Valentine farm," or "America, too, is a delusion, the grandest one of all." What does Lander mean? How does delusion function throughout the novel, and why is this moment pivotal for the actions that follow?

## **All the Light We Cannot See by Anthony Doerr**

### ***Themes:***

1. Human nature at its best and worst, good vs evil
2. Courage and acts of selflessness
3. Effects of war
4. Free will can triumph over destiny and duty
5. Complexity of science: confidence and self-worth vs. manipulation and control

### ***Motifs and symbols:***

- Technology, especially the radio
- Locks and keys
- Shells
- Sea of Flames diamond
- Scaled models of town
- Familial bonds

### **Questions:**

1. What parallels exist between the two children, Marie-Laure and Werner, as they develop into participants in the war?
2. How does Doerr illustrate the complexities of human morality in the face of life-or-death drama?
3. The book opens with two epigraphs. How do these quotes set the scene for the rest of the book? Discuss how the radio plays a major part in the story and the time period. How do you think the impact of the radio back then compares with the impact of the Internet on today's society?
4. The narration moves back and forth both in time and between different characters. How did this affect your reading experience? How do you think the experience would have been different if the story had been told entirely in chronological order?
5. "To shut your eyes is to guess nothing of blindness." What did you learn or realize about blindness through Marie-Laure's perspective? Do you think her being blind gave her any advantages?
6. What do you think of the author's decision to flash forward at the end of the book? Did you like getting a peek into the future of some of these characters? Did anything surprise you?

## **There There Tommy Orange**

### ***Themes:***

1. Relationship between storytelling and historical memory
2. Tension between modernity and tradition
3. Generational attitudes toward spirituality in the Native community
4. Violence against & genocide of indigenous people
5. Sorrows that drive individuals to their obsessions/addictions

### ***Motifs and symbols:***

- Indian head TV test card
- Spider legs
- Alcoholism
- Alcatraz island
- Medicine chest
- Powwow dance

### **Questions:**

1. The prologue of *There There* provides a historical overview of how Native populations were systematically stripped of their identity, their rights, their land, and, in some cases, their very existence by colonialist forces in America. How did reading this section make you feel? How does the prologue set the tone for the reader? Discuss the use of the Indian head as iconography. How does this relate to the erasure of Native identity in American culture? What is the cumulative effect of Orange creating so many narrative threads—and so many varied points of view—to the action?
2. How is femininity depicted in *There There*? What roles do the female characters assume in their community? Within their families?
3. In the Interlude, the narrator challenges the reader, "Look no further than your last name. Follow it back and you might find your line paved with gold, or beset with traps." What does your name reveal when you follow it as the narrator suggests?

4. Discuss the development of the “Urban Indian” identity and ownership of that label. How does it relate to the push for assimilation by the United States government? How do the characters in *There There* navigate this modern form of identity alongside their ancestral roots?
5. How is the city of Oakland characterized in the novel? How does the city’s gentrification affect the novel’s characters? Their attitudes toward home and stability?
6. Examine the structure of *There There*. Why do you think Orange chose to present his narrative using different voices and different perspectives? How do the interlude and the prologue help to bolster the themes of the narrative? What was the most surprising element of the novel to you? What was its moment of greatest impact?

## **Sing, Unburied, Sing by Jesmyn Ward**

### ***Themes:***

1. Limitations and bonds of family
2. Maintaining a slave state through imprisonment
3. Impact on the present of slavery, lynching, anti-black violence
4. Nature as a source of healing, relief, solace
5. Caring for others as a form of love vs a form of labor

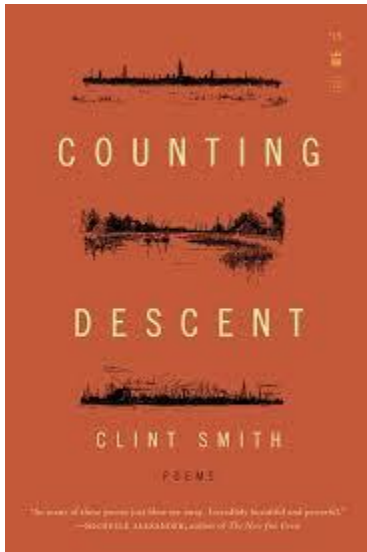
### ***Motifs and symbols:***

- Gris-gris bag & its items
- Water imagery
- Tree of ghosts
- Spiritual traditions & intelligences
- Allusions to *The Odyssey* in Jojo’s quest for maturity and manhood
- Warping, flexibility of time and death
- Singing

### ***Questions:***

1. Leonie’s neglect and indifference of her children is present throughout the novel. Why does she treat them so poorly? Is it simply that her love for herself gets in the way, as Mam says, or is it more complicated than that? What role does her grief play in how she parents?
2. Pop’s stories often involve the ghost of the young boy, Richie, but he rarely speaks about his own deceased son. Is the fixation with one related to the other? What does it tell us about Pop and his own grief?
3. At one point in the novel the ghost of Richie says he assumes [Parchman Prison](#), which long operated like a plantation, must have changed over time. But when he returns, he describes the “new” Parchman as a place where men sit “for hours in small, windowless rooms staring at big black boxes that streamed dreams.” Is it significant that Parchman has not changed for the better? (p.s. click on the link for more info on Parchman)
4. Water plays an important role throughout the novel. Pop’s name is River. Mam is known as the “saltwater woman.” The town and prison where Pop and Michael are incarcerated are named for the “parched man.” Jojo wonders who the parched man is, if he looked like Pop, Jojo, or Michael. Which characters seem to need water? Which are of the water?
5. One of the epigraphs of the book is this line from Southern Gothic writer Eudora Welty: “Memory is a living thing,” she writes, and that “all that is remembered joins, and lives — the old and the young, the past and the present, the living and the dead.” How did this statement on memory echo throughout the novel?
6. The novel is told from multiple characters’ points of view: Jojo, Leonie, Richie. Why do you think Ward chose to tell the story from these voices, and why do you think the other characters don’t serve as narrators: Mam, Pop and Michael, for example?

*AP Literature*  
*Summer Reading Assignment - Poetry*  
*Counting Descent* by Clint Smith



*Clint Smith*  
*Writer • Teacher • Researcher*

*Official website*

*Be sure to click video to  
see Clint in action!*

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## Official TED Speaker:



## Podcast Host:



*He doesn't only write poetry. Check out his work in The New Yorker, where he writes about sports, race, and education, among other things.*

THE  
NEW YORKER






*Clint Smith on Art, Activism, and Education at the Aspen Institute (Full Video 1:22:41) not required to watch, but still cool*





# Playlist of Poems

Watch the poems and then use the boxes to record your ideas.

Poem Title	Initial Reaction	Analysis
<b>what the cicada said to the black boy</b> 		
<b>Counting Descent</b> 		
<b>When They Tell You the Brontosaurus Never Existed</b> 		
<b>Aristotle</b> <i>(not in book)</i> 		
<b>Why we shouldn't forget that US presidents owned slaves</b> <i>(not in book)</i> 		

After reading *Counting Descent* in its entirety, answer the following questions. Each question's response should be a solid, well-written paragraph (approximately ½ page long each).

1. Which poem in *Counting Descent* did you connect with most and why?
2. To what extent does Smith depict contemporary African American lives? Why is it important for everyone to read about these experiences?
3. What makes "Counting Descent" (pages 21-22) the ideal title poem for the collection?
4. What do you make of Smith's teachings to "the black boy" (from the ocean, cicada, fire hydrant, window, or cathedral)? Why have inanimate objects as the speaker of the poems? Who is the intended audience of these poems?
5. Beyond the "black boy" poems, how else does Smith unify *Counting Descent* as a collection? Feel free to discuss voice, form, theme, motif, language, purpose, or anything else you find significant.
6. "There is a Lake Here" is written after Jamaal May's poem "[There are Birds Here](#)." What inspirations from May does Smith incorporate into his poem? How does he make it his own?
7. What makes "There is a Lake Here" the ideal resolution to this collection?

**\*\*\*\*\*DUE ON THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL\*\*\*\*\***