

State 2013, Part 4's Tie-Breaking Prompt: Having spent the better part of a year with Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poetry, consider Jan Owen's "First Love" in terms of beauty's ability to influence poets.

### First Love

Titian's *Young Englishman with a Glove*, circa 1530

It happened in Physics,  
reading a Library art book under the desk,  
(the lesson was Archimedes in the bath)  
I turned a page and fell  
for an older man, and anonymous at that,  
hardly ideal—  
he was four hundred and forty-five,  
I was fourteen.  
'Eureka!' streaked each thought  
(I prayed no-one would hear)  
and Paradise all term  
was page 179  
(I prayed no-one would guess).  
Of course  
my fingers, sticky with toffee and bliss,  
failed to entice him from his century;  
his cool grey stare  
fastened me firmly in mine.  
I got six overdues,  
suspension of borrowing rights  
and a D in Physics.  
But had by heart what Archimedes proves.  
Ten years later I married:  
a European with cool grey eyes,  
a moustache,  
pigskin gloves.

1986

Literary concepts that **MIGHT** be used in a discussion of Owens's poem include

allusion	muse	symbol	zeugma
consonance	parenthesis	tactile imagery	-----
free verse	pun	tone	<i>femme inspiratrice</i>
metonymy	speaker / persona	visual imagery	syllipsis

The contestant should find, in Owens's recounting of her adolescent crush, evidence that idealized physical beauty has the power to inspire. The approach might be subjective, or it might be a more generalized assessment of the role that art—graphic, plastic, literary, or indeed cinematic—plays in the development of a person's appreciation of beauty—and by extension a person's development as a writer, specifically as a poet.

Any referencing of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poetry as homage to Nature's ability to inspire the poet is welcomed and should be recognized as a response to the prompt.

***Student Response (State 2013)***

Love beneath the Physics Desk

It is not uncommon for students to be so enticed by a subject in school that they consequently subordinate all subjects to the favorite. It is probably even safe to say that students in this room competing for the State title in UIL Literary Criticism have been guilty of concealing *A Handbook to Literature* under a math desk or a science desk, anything other than English, for stolen glances at the pages that they love most. This is the UIL competitors' art, their muse. Jan Owen's poem "First Love" describes a time when she, too, saw the beauty in art and fell in love, her passion for the artwork causing her to deem all else unworthy of her attention. Just as Coleridge's *la femme inspiratrice* was nature, a painting in an art book concealed beneath a physics desk inspires the speaker in Owen's poem.

Written in free verse, the poem is a humorous narrative wrought with excessive hyperbole describing the speaker's falling in love with art. Reading an art book in physics class as the teacher drones on about "Archimedes in a bath" (line 3), the persona "[falls] / for an older man [. . .] hardly ideal" (4-6). She writes, "[H]e was four hundred and forty-five, / I was fourteen" (7-8), a little anachronistic for a crush. The speaker acknowledges the absurdity of her crush, "hardly ideal," yet still continues to ignore the lesson, "pray[ing] no-one would hear" (10) because she is so enraptured by the physical beauty of the painting that it actually conjures feelings for the man himself.

The speaker then describes the joy this discovery of beauty has brought her: "Paradise all term / was page 179" (11-12). The parenthetical remarks about her worrying that others might witness her love affair further assert the idea that she knows she is being silly, yet the art draws her closer still. The speaker uses syllepsis in the line "my fingers, sticky with toffee and bliss" (15), adding to the humorous tone of the poem. The reader can infer that the narrator is young. However, despite the speaker's attraction to the man in the painting, she is unable to "entice him from his century" and consequently, after spending so much time fantasizing, fails physics. In writing this poem, the poet argues that beauty and inspiration can be found even in the strangest of places. The girl's love for the painting inspires a poem about her feelings for it, as well as her willingness to sacrifice her time to gaze at it.

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District 2, 2013, Part 4's Tie-Breaking Prompt: Read Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "An Invocation," and compose an essay that addresses Coleridge's focus on the poet's imagination.

### An Invocation

Sweet Muse! companion of my every hour!  
Voice of my Joy! Sure soother of the sigh!  
Now plume thy pinions, now exert each power,  
And fly to him who owns the candid\* eye.                      **impartial, unbiased, pure**

And if a smile of Praise thy labour hail  
(Well shall thy labours then my mind employ)  
Fly fleetly back, sweet Muse! and with the tale  
O'erspread my Features with a flush of Joy!

Literary concepts that MIGHT be used by the contestant in a discussion of Coleridge's poem include

alliteration	feminine rhyme	invocation	quatrain
apostrophe	iambic pentameter	metaphor	syncope
envoy	imagination	metonymy	synecdoche
esemplastic power	inversion	muse	tone
			-----
			divine afflatus
			sigmatism

The brevity of and isolation of Coleridge's addressing the "Sweet Muse" suggests an envoy, perhaps for an ongoing body of work. The student might recognize this possibility in the appositive "companion of my every hour," which suggests both the poet's conscious life and his sleeping. The fullness of the relationship between the poet and the muse is further suggested in "Voice of my Joy! Sure soother of the sigh!" (line 2), a pairing of adulatory figurative phrases that gives direct responsibility for both uplifting joy and succor (whenever the metonymic sigh prevails) to the Sweet Muse.

The young contestant might concentrate on the role of the muse—here unspecified, but in the context of Coleridge's romantic focus on natural world, nature herself. The muse is both a companion in the creation of the poem (lines 1 and 6), which seems to be an exercise of the esemplastic power, and also something that helps the poet see the world with an impartial eye (line 4). The poet, while immersed in the inspiring vision, comes to see "the tale"—nature, perhaps including his poetry—as a unified whole.

The adventurous young writer might seek to compare the relatively abstract source of inspiration to which "An Invocation" is addressed to the more concrete source of inspiration in Coleridge's "Kubla Kahn," "the damsel with a dulcimer."

***Student Response (District 2 2013)***

The Poet's Imagination in Coleridge's "An Invocation"

In ancient poetry, poets customarily would call on a muse for inspiration, or divine afflatus, for the poem he was about to write. In fact, it became a specific part of the poet's writing process, the invocation whereby the poet would pray for inspiration and, if granted, write whatever the gods wanted to be heard. In "An Invocation" Coleridge expresses the importance of inspiration to imagination in poetry in adhering to this ancient tradition and apostrophizing a muse, asking for inspiration.

In his poem Coleridge focuses on the fleeting nature of inspiration and how grateful a poet should be when granted a visit by a muse. He accomplishes this by employing imagery of birds, the epitome of evanescence, by using such words as *plume*, *pinions*, *fly*, and *fleety*. The first two lines are the poet's description of the desirability of inspiration, calling the muse "sweet" and a "companion of my every hour! / Voice of my joy!" (lines 1-2). Using alliteration, he tells how inspiration alleviates any troubles that ail him. The repetition of the "s" sounds, sigmatism, in "[s]ure, soother of the sigh" (2) calls the reader's attention to each of the muse's positive attributes.

Coleridge then calls the muse to spread her wings and fly to him, a humble poet, so that he may write what needs to be heard. "And if a smile of Praise thy labour hail / (Well shall thy labors then my mind employ)" (5-6) is Coleridge's assurance that the muse's labors will not be in vain, that her labor will become his labor.

In a continuation of the bird imagery, the concluding lines of the poem exemplify the evanescence of inspiration that as quickly as it comes, it will go. However, inspiration leaves Coleridge's [f]eatures with a flush of joy" (8) because the muse has granted him the imagination to write.

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