UIL Literary Criticism

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Tropes, Schemes, and Themes:
What Might Be Addressed in Parts 2, 3, and 4 of the Test

Our *vade mecum*, Harmon and Holman's *Handbook to Literature* 12e, offers definitions, examples, and brief discussions of, among the many other entries, the principles of rhetoric and the principles of versification, which include the various tropes and schemes upon which much of the delight that is poetic expression rests, and they become, necessarily, *les points de départ* for the student seeking an understanding of imaginative literature, especially poetry.

The presence of these tropes and schemes does not ensure the quality or the novelty of a work of literature; however, it does make that literature immediately eligible for inclusion in a pool of selections from which might be drawn literature for analysis, especially for young students learning what makes literature work well in the eyes of a receptive reading public and, significantly, in the estimation of those scholars who give shape to the canons. We recognize the importance of a poem or prose piece that serves as a model for our students no less than do the editors of the anthologies that serve us, both teachers and students, in the classroom. The same pragmatic approach holds in the selection of representative literature for inclusion in the second, third, and fourth parts of the UIL Literary Criticism tests, Invitational through State.

The sonnet, as a closed form is a good place to start. The schemes, as a group of devices, especially sound devices (e.g., alliteration, consonance) and word arrangement (chiasmus, climax, polyptoton), constitute a baseline expectation; the tropes (e.g., litotes, metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche) guarantee a cognitively understood eloquence; and, together, the presence of tropes and schemes reinforces the "almost invariable" shape of this particular form—its rhythm and its rhyme scheme contributing to the sonnet's concision.

So it is that the cinquain, the *terza rima*, the roundel, the acrostic, the villanelle, the clerihew, the pleiades, and all their sister forms, like the sonnet, become playgrounds for the poet and the reader—the schemes and the tropes serving as delight through discovery.

The open-form poem often eschews rhyme and rhythm, but the tropes (and other schemes) can abound.

The *Handbook* does include many esoteric terms and not a few other-language "duplications"; a working knowledge of these terms we can leave to the graduate students, though a respectable multiple-choice test relies on legitimate options among the four distractors.

Effective literature, literature that invites a response, frequently offers more than one single theme, and in doing so, it often relies on motifs, diction, allusions, echoes, resonance, and other means of accentuating the work's thematic concern(s), and these should find themselves subjects of careful analysis.