





# Into the Words

By **Melissa Glenn Haber '87**

Photography **Kathleen Doohar**

**I**n the beginning was the Word... Like the generations of Commonwealth English students who came before and after me, I learned that when I sought an answer, I should consult the page. As a stubborn adolescent, however, I often chafed as my teachers pulled me back to the text, away from the search for what Mrs. Chatfield called the D.I.M. (Deep Inner Meaning). It was only after I returned to the School as a history teacher that I began to understand how much my younger self had missed. I had thought that my teachers were working from a grand theory of how books should be read, but it turns out that the goals of the Commonwealth English program are far more modest than I had imagined. As a reader and as a person—and now as the mother of a new 9th grader—I have come to be very grateful for the elemental importance and simplicity of what the Commonwealth English program teaches.

Those of us who struggled through Commonwealth English classes can take some comfort in knowing there once was a day when Eric Davis himself felt flummoxed. He tells of a time in his first days at Williams College when he sat with other perplexed freshmen in an art history class, struggling to describe how the two equestrian statues before them differed. At first not one of the 50 students could see any difference at all. “Finally,” he recalls, “one student ventured that one horse’s tail was cocked. Others slowly noticed other details. Eventually one of the statues stood forth to all as an arrogant masterpiece, the other as a junkyard of awkward mistakes.”

Commonwealth students past and present are likely to recognize that feeling of being brought up short by the simple request to stop worrying about meaning and simply describe what they hear in the text. Commonwealth students are so good at framing hypotheses I suspect many find it hard to believe their teachers are asking them something so exceedingly straightforward as *What do you see? What do you feel? How does the language make you see and feel that?* They are essential questions, disarmingly direct.

This enduring focus on language does not come out of some dogmatic dismissal of what an author may have been thinking about contemporary society or the events of his or her time. Far from being grounded in a rejection of contextual analysis, the Commonwealth English program is founded on the recognition that if students’ conclusions are to carry any weight they must begin with what’s on the page. From there, discussions can be historical, philosophical, and even personal, especially among teenagers. As Judith Siporin notes, “It’s hard not to talk about difficult relationships between men and women when you read Hemingway, or about attitudes to sex when you read Hardy.” Begin with mindful reading, our English teachers say, and you can go anywhere.

There is no point in work  
unless it absorbs you  
like an absorbing game.

If it doesn’t absorb you  
if it’s never any fun  
don’t do it.

When a man goes out into his work  
he is alive like a tree in spring,  
he is living, not merely working.

—D.H. Lawrence, “Work”

## ACTIVE AMUSEMENT

The attentiveness at the heart of the Commonwealth English program grew from its roots in the work of Reuben Brower and his colleagues in the English department at Harvard, including Anne Ferry, who went on to a long career at Boston College. Brower, a student of Robert Frost at Amherst, was Eric Davis’ thesis advisor; Ferry’s students included Kate Bluestein, and her two children attended Commonwealth: Stephen ’78 and

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Elizabeth ’85. Brower, Ferry, and David Kalstone also edited *Beginning with Poems*, the anthology, still used at Commonwealth, that included the poems Brower found most effective in Humanities 6, his legendary literature course for undergraduates. Hum 6 was intended to help all students love great books as Brower loved them, not merely as monuments of human achievement, but as a form of “active amusement, a game demanding the highest alertness and the finest degree of sensibility,” as he wrote in the first essay of *In Defense of Reading*, the 1962 collection of criticism he co-edited with Richard Poirer.

The problem with many literature courses, Brower maintained, was that they “present[ed] the undergraduate with the end products of literary scholarship without being sure he has read or has the capacity to read the works we are interpreting.” The intellectual reward in knowing what great works said was a pale shadow of having students experience literature fully. “There is a danger,” Brower added, “that rich and special experiences will be too readily reduced to crude examples of a historic idea or a moral principle.” To avoid this reduction, teachers of literature should cultivate the habit of what Coleridge, quoted by Brower, described as “judgment ever awake and steady self-possession with enthusiasm and feeling profound or vehement.” By “reading in slow motion,” students could “observe what is happening, in order to attend very closely to [passages’] words, their uses, and their meanings”—a type of reading that not only occurred at a more luxuriant pace, but also watched itself, so that the reader became aware of both the text and the experience of reading. Said Brower, “reading at this level—to borrow Coleridgean terms a second time—‘brings the whole soul of man into activity.’”

To help students read with full awareness, and to develop the language to describe and discuss the experience, Brower and his “section men” designed exercises focused on small portions of the text that aimed to tune the ear and allow students to “discover the genuine.” Former section man Robert Bell, now a professor of English at Williams College, recalled in 2004, “Brower was a marvelous mentor. Every week he met with his Hum 6 staff, assistant professors, and graduate TAs. We planned strategies, devised writing exercises, contemplated challenging exam questions. Brower was a magnificent teacher of teachers. By precept and example, he demonstrated that we were part of an important, exciting enterprise.” Taking part in these weekly planning sessions were other section men who went on to impressive futures: Poirer, literary critic Paul de Man, future Harvard president Neil Rudenstine, and a certain Charles Chatfield.

Charlie Chatfield became Commonwealth’s Reuben Brower, the organizing force behind a durable and endlessly adaptable intellectual approach. When Charlie came to Commonwealth in 1966, he brought with him the skill of nudging students toward the most significant bits of text and then asking provocative questions. He also was a treasured mentor, shepherding first-year teachers such as Devon Jersild and Ted Braun, who came to the School on Dodge Fellowships. Kate Bluestein recalls how he visited classes, team-taught electives, and helped critique essay questions. “His

love of literature, his playfulness (and his mischievousness!), and his curiosity animated and inspired what we did,” and set the tone for a fertile intellectual atmosphere. Together, Charlie, Eric Davis, Kate Bluestein, and Judith Siporin (who had read with a parallel method at Cambridge University) joined with John Hughes and incorporated Brower’s ideas into a program that would make sense to untrained (though intellectually promising) teenagers, opening their minds to Brower’s “complete and agile response to words,” encompassing tone, diction, voice, and, crucially, emotional impact.

By encouraging a primal and thorough response, close reading can serve as a corrective to those students who yearn for the big picture, as I did. It slows students down; it elevates the pleasure in words to an end in itself, so that students can identify and experience for themselves what Mark Twain calls “those intensely right words” whose “resulting effect is physical as well as spiritual, and electrically prompt.” Reading slowly and responsively also trains the reader to experience life through the eyes of another. “I for one certainly found in literature a way out of the cozy little room I loved

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so much in my very small, unadventurous New Jersey suburban town,” Eric recalls. “Out! Away! What goes on out there in the big world? That’s what it felt like when I started to read widely, and it’s what goes on still even in reading ‘old’ things like Donne and the Brontës.”

## THE GREAT ARC

Reading can thus take us outside of ourselves, but not if we’re busy projecting ourselves all over the page. One primary goal of the Commonwealth English sequence, therefore, is to shake students out of their certitude until they focus closely on what is actually being said in the text. As Margaret Homans ’70 recalled in 2005:

English with Mr. Chatfield began (or so I recall) with Saul Bellow’s *Seize the Day*, the perfect choice, I now see, for breaking the adolescent habit of identification, since the lumpish main character is an unromantic failure in his mid-forties. Instead, miraculously, Mr. Chatfield showed us how to open a book and listen critically to the voices speaking there, to hear how diction and rhythm create Wilhelm’s plaintive, self-justifying tone even as it mingles with the omniscient narrator’s skepticism.

The process of learning to listen critically begins in English 9, which serves as an introduction to the method of slow reading and also, in the words of Catherine Brewster and Mara Dale, as a “clearing of the decks” and a “clearing of minds to make them open and receptive.” It takes effort to convince students to get rid of the knee-jerk interpretations they’ve learned, to train them away from the text-to-self connections encouraged in middle school and toward something based in what’s actually on the page. Exercises in how to write a cogent paragraph announce that here is a new way of thinking, and reading a variety of styles adds adventure to the proceedings, as students try out their new tools on books ranging from Homer to *Cyrano de Bergerac*, pre-Shakespearean Scots ballads, a Victorian novel, Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, and Annie Dillard’s *An American Childhood*. Class discussions and exercises encourage students to “root around in the text” themselves, as Mara says. As he neared the end of his first semester at Commonwealth, Atticus Murphy ’14 described it this way:

Let’s say we read the *Odyssey* and somebody thinks Odysseus is conceited and boastful, and another person is saying, no, he’s the most modest person in the entire book; everyone has to come up with things from the reading to back up what they’re saying.

This digging through the words opens the way to unexpected discoveries. “Compelling stuff pops, or indeed bursts, out of the things we read, once the class finds its way to the heart of the matter,” says Eric.

In 10th grade, contrasting voices and styles are a “jolt to the ear,” Judith Siporin explains, that keeps students off-kilter. Her students are steeped in Hemingway before being “confronted” by D. H. Lawrence in order to help them savor “the full register of the language” and appreciate both what Brent Whelan calls “the excesses of romantic art” and that which Judith describes as

“spare, down to the bones, stark.” Through stories and essays by Katherine Mansfield, George Orwell, and Damon Runyon; *Great Expectations*, and Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, students untangle subtleties of language to reveal what makes a narrator trustworthy or not. Discussions broaden to include other aspects of writing, such as poetic metrics, and how they contribute to a larger effect. Thus I witnessed Eric leading his sophomores through *Macbeth*’s shifting metrics, skillfully letting them compare the witches’ trochaic rhythm of

Double, double, toil, and trouble  
Fire burn and cauldron bubble

to the more usual iambic pentameter of the less infernal characters as yet another way of showing students the ways in which a reader can respond to the text.

Junior year marks the pinnacle of slow reading. As Kate Bluestein describes it, English 11 represents the great moment when the “daily practice of limbering up with small exercises” in order “to make sense of one little creation of words” finally pays off on a larger scale. This is the year when many students realize that a written work can be a “literary event” distinct from the plot. Moving in and out of a work, teasing apart its levels of meaning, becomes a prime pursuit. In his first year and half at Commonwealth, Caleb Weinreb ’11 recalls,

I thought an essay was like a proof in math: something that made a claim and drew evidence from the text to support it. “Read carefully” meant “decipher.” I had a real breakthrough, I think, midway through English 11 when I realized that to analyze a text you have to tell a story—that a thesis shouldn’t be a declaration of fact but a guided tour through the text. An essay shouldn’t tell you what to think but explain how to feel.

By the end of English 11, students have learned to navigate works that are layered and ambiguous without reducing them to a single reading, helping them “sustain ‘doubleness,’” as Mara Dale says. Coming to grips with multiple, often contradictory interpretations is an intellectual test that mirrors the new social and psychological intricacies in adolescents’ lives, and the texts of English 11 help students find language and images to grasp what’s hard to wrap up nicely: conflict and contradiction, complexity, identity, and the vastness of life. In this vein, *The Great Gatsby* is a worthwhile choice to end the year. As students read and discuss Nick Carraway’s reactions to *Gatsby* and the last passages of the book, when Nick can participate in *Gatsby*’s vision and also stand apart to recognize its failure, they realize that Nick himself is a reader of sorts. “You can feel the excitement in the room, sometimes, as one discovery follows another, and the whole novel falls into place for them,” says Kate Bluestein. “They write, some of them, in a white-hot passion!” For others, Hamlet epitomizes the Commonwealth reader. As Brent Whelan explains, the soliloquy “O what a rogue and peasant slave am I” shows Hamlet “trying to understand his ethical problem by exploring and trying on a series of voices (melancholy son, bold prince, antic wise guy, humble apprentice, avenger, etc.), inhabiting the voice to appreciate its full range of possibilities just as an exemplary English 11 student would do.” Some English teachers like to say that when students can draw a complete understanding from the language of a text, they have earned their “literary driver’s licenses.”

In English 12, then, it’s time to take the new car for a spin. “Things really do open out once 12th grade arrives,” says Eric Davis. As students get older and less inclined to “make leaps based on shreds of an author’s life,” as Kate Bluestein puts it, classes move into how writers related to their milieu, and how their work fits into larger themes of literary, social, and intellectual history. Electives for upperclassmen are often organized around culture, time, or place—recent offerings include African Fiction, Modernism, Disquieting Fiction, and Monsters (beginning with *Frankenstein*). For those curious about a wider array of expository forms, Catherine Brewster offers English 12: Reasons for Writing, in which students delve into a range of speeches, memoirs, science writing, and polemic alongside fictional masters of verbal manipulation such as Shakespeare’s Iago. With each genre, students then “get to try out good writers’ moves,” as Catherine says. The standard English 12 curriculum also allows students to take their close-reading skills off-road. Titles are often chosen with an eye toward who’s in the class (no *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* for a room full of cynics, says Judith) and the arc of the class often links the texts together in exploration of a single theme: the fall from paradise; attempts to capture the unknowable; the evolution of Romanticism. To me, it illustrates the mystery of reading that many of these themes can be found in the set of books that most frequently appear in the different iterations of English 12: *Othello*, *Paradise Lost*, and that capstone to the Commonwealth experience, E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*.

It’s not simply tradition, therefore, that so many students read Forster’s novel as the finale of the English curriculum: the novel sums up much of what Commonwealth faculty want students to remember about reading. “You do best if you think about the whole enterprise as a long adventure in going places you haven’t been yet, and finding out what goes on there,” says Eric. “It’s a trip to Paris or Timbuktu.” As Forster explores friendship and mistrust in the British Raj, teachers note the book’s consideration of the “unsayable and unknowable,” of “cultures defined linguistically with crossing idioms,” of “total immersion in chaos and confusion that’s never fully sorted out.” Or, in Judith Siporin’s words, “collisions—Indians—English—elephants trumpeting—caught up in the wild cyclone of it all.” And then there’s the work’s sentimental appeal: *A Passage to India* is rife with themes that echo through the minds of graduating seniors: the straddlings of unfamiliar cultures, newness, foreignness, leaving; how to find civilization, instead of succumbing to the Marabar Caves’ muffling echo, “boom.”

So *A Passage to India* was valedictory: I’d missed that. As an adolescent I had assumed that the books we read were arranged in ascending order of greatness, that *Hamlet* was superior to *Macbeth*, and that *A Passage to India* was the height of literary perfection. Though it’s true that Commonwealth students are expected to graduate “knowing their way around a sonnet and a three-decker novel,” as Kate Bluestein says, the books they read have been chosen not for their canonical status but because they are effective at teaching slow reading. Rare is the book, story, essay, or poem sharp enough to be an effective instructive example, which is why many of the books my classmates and I read 25 years ago will also end up in my daughter’s backpack. Many of the short exercises and papers she’ll write will be the carefully revised successors of the questions I tried to answer, and I expect when she is a senior her English teacher will hand her *A Passage to India* with the same anticipation of someone sharing a favorite delicacy. In short, there is a simple reason Commonwealth English retains much of what Charlie Chatfield first introduced decades ago: it works.

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## DEEPER MEANINGS

It works. What does that mean?

The study of English literature at Commonwealth cannot be reduced to a single purpose, any more than a text should be limited to a single interpretation. Some goals mirror Brower's: a greater awareness of the language makes reading more pleasurable. But beyond the private conversation between reader and writer, such full attention to tone, diction, rhythm, and metaphor are helpful well outside the sphere of a high-school English class. Being able to know what another person is saying (and perhaps the feelings behind the spoken words) is necessary in any endeavor involving other people. Greg Fried '79, chair of the philosophy department at Suffolk University, gives his students a manual on close reading that harkens back to what he was taught at Commonwealth. As a history teacher, I myself rely on the training my students receive in their English classes to help them take in the richness of historical documents and write clearly about what they glean. Classes in art history, film, Latin American literature, and more all ask students to muster the close reading and multilayered analysis they started learning in English. And, of course, full appreciation of what others are saying matters in all important relationships. As Eric Davis points out, *how* you phrase things—"Clean up your room!" "Would you like to go out with me?"—can have a profound effect. Charlie Chatfield recognized this when he described learning to read in the Commonwealth way as a kind of moral preparation. After all, as Polly Chatfield put it, there is no greater gift you can give to another human being than to really listen.

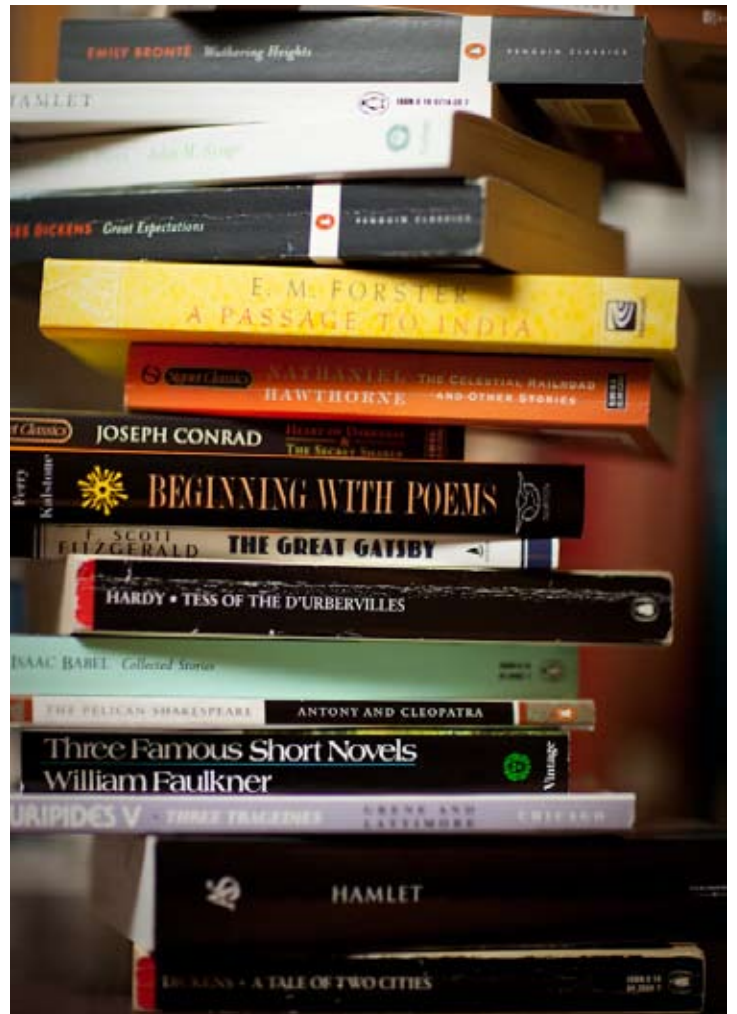
The Commonwealth English program also encourages students to practice grappling with abstraction and illogic as classes talk about ideas that are hard to wrap up in discursive language. For many students, moments of insight become well-polished touchstones. Hannah Kaplan-Hartlaub '11, in her graduation speech, referred to Frost's "For Once Then, Something":

[...]Once, when trying with chin against a well-curb,  
I discerned, as I thought, beyond the picture,  
Through the picture, a something white, uncertain,  
Something more of the depths—and then I lost it.  
Water came to rebuke the too clear water.  
One drop fell from a fern, and lo, a ripple  
Shook whatever it was lay there at bottom,  
Blurred it, blotted it out. What was that whiteness?  
Truth? A pebble of quartz? For once, then, something.

The last line of the poem became, for Hannah and her friends, a quick way to invoke the feeling of an idea barely sensed and almost understood. Hannah remarked,

In the end, the speaker hasn't figured out what he's seen at the bottom of the well, or really what it is that he's looking for. Though we often do find the essence of things at Commonwealth, in the same way that the speaker is left wondering what he saw, we can't always come to a rousing conclusion during every discussion. [...] We draw from our collective readings a sort of shorthand, a Commonwealth language. We quote and refer so often because that is our way of articulating with the most possible precision what we wish to say. There's no scramble to fit clumsy words together when 'for once, then, something' is at our disposal. 'Truth? A pebble of quartz?' comes in handy during those moments when we are straining to discern.

For me, then, the Commonwealth English program is remarkable for guiding students effectively to a multitude of ends—shared pleasure, the gift of listening, a way to grasp the unknowable—each one sufficient in itself and yet reflecting all the others, and all of them united in using the imaginative faculty of the mind to sense the genuine. I hope it's not just affection, bias, or arrogance to say that Commonwealth students do learn how to think, write, and feel in a deeply affecting and effective way. The



essays they write for classes, college applications, the spring parent gatherings, and for graduation are remarkable for their absence of cliché and predictable theses.

This past spring one of Commonwealth's extraordinary readers and writers, Norton Wong, also took to the podium at graduation, where he spoke about the way Commonwealth had taught him to see:

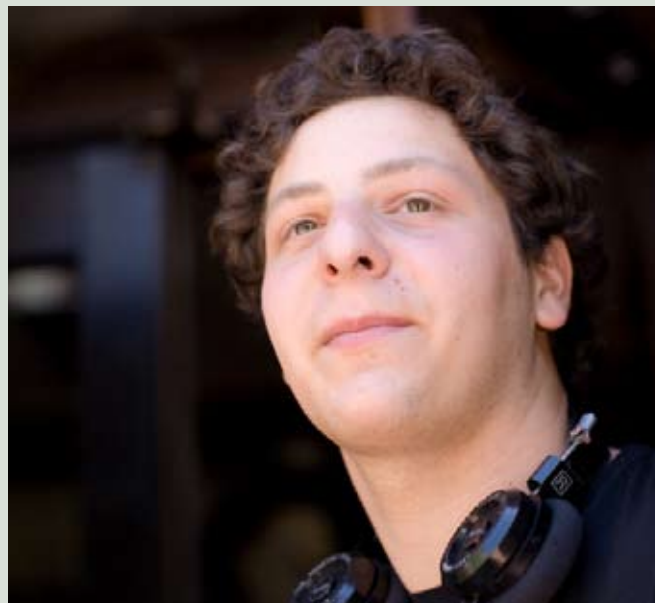
One thing I've learned to pay more attention to is the little things. I used to never look up much in class, busy doodling in margins. But funny people do funny things, and I've seen a funny bunch of people at this school. I'll be naming names. For instance, Ariel Kraakman, who had a habit of staring mistily into outer space, and was often heard laughing as Kindness would if it had a voice. Or our Marielle Boudreau, who flings her hair back and recites Catullus and Gatsby without warning...Stuart Spina, who'd recommend in a quiet, excited shout that clubs go meet in [room] "6F," which exists outside our five-floor space-time continuum. These little things have made daily life more interesting, as if a light has gone on at night—a reason to use my eyes, a first step...Life is full of details that aren't obvious, and messages that take time to understand. And you're not going to want to leave those kinds of things unnoticed.

Norton's words sum up how Commonwealth is, as it has always been, a place that revolves around an intense life of the mind while recognizing that the mind is not only a rational machine but an imaginative, emotional presence as well—and that quiet listening can yield the most fertile collaboration between the two. Despite my early resistance, I'm grateful for that constant reminder to consider carefully what's in front of me—art, words, music, people—before I cast my shadow across them. By encouraging listening and feeling as part of its everyday rigor, the school asks us to not only be better thinkers, but also better people: more sensitive, more expansive, more genuine. Perhaps that insistence on an imaginative intellectualism helps explain how Commonwealth continues to attract and nurture students so committed to academics, the arts, social justice, and friendship, year after year after year.



*In addition to teaching history at Commonwealth, Melissa Glenn Haber '87 is the author of four novels for middle-grade readers. Her most recent, *Your Best Friend, Meredith*, was recently released in paperback by Simon & Schuster. She lives in Somerville with her husband, Ezra Haber Glenn '87, and their three children, including a daughter in the class of 2015.*

At [www.commschool.org/cm](http://www.commschool.org/cm): Watch graduation speeches by Norton Wong '11 and Hannah Kaplan-Hartlaub '11, as well as other student talks.



## Close Reading One's Life

By Caleb Weinreb '11

During a solitary late-afternoon walk down State Street in Chicago, I realized how much my 11th-grade English teacher changed me. Though the sky was still bright blue, the streets wedged between tall buildings had already darkened. I was alone with my thoughts in the cool air, when, out of nowhere, a horn blared and a sedan shot out of the alley right in front of me. Looking up completely dumbfounded, I saw a man across the alley staring at me. I made an expression like: "Whoah... some people are crazy." The man scowled, then croaked back, "What an asshole!" At that I smiled, and kept smiling for two more blocks, nodding and thinking: "Yeah. That's right. What an asshole."

That would have been the end of it if not for Ms. Siporin, who taught me to notice how the details in a story elucidate something under its surface. If we read that story in English, Ms. Siporin would ask, "What is the protagonist's state of mind before he encounters the car?" And some brave student would say, "He's lonely!" Ms. Siporin would continue, "What are the metaphorical implications of its being dark on the street but light in the sky?" And one of us would guess that even if things are sad and dark inside for the protagonist, he would find a brighter world if he looked up and outside himself. She might suggest that by connecting with the man across the alley, the protagonist realizes he is in solidarity with all the indignant pedestrians of the world. There on State Street, as I wondered why the incident made me so cheerful, the Ms. Siporin inside me helped me close-read myself, showing me that I was happy because I didn't feel like a pariah anymore. Now I was on the inside, and the driver was the outcast!

*Adapted from a college application essay.*