

AP English Literature  
Poetry Prompt

Here is a sample poetry essay prompt. Please spend 8-10 minutes working the material to set up the essay you imagine yourself writing.

In “On the Subway,” Sharon Olds brings two worlds into close proximity. Identify the contrasts that develop both portraits in the poem and discuss the insights that the narrator comes to as a result of the experience. Refer to such literary techniques as tone, poetic devices, imagery, and organization.

**On the Subway**  
**By Sharon Olds**

The boy and I face each other.  
His feet are huge, in black sneakers  
laced with white in a complex pattern like a  
set of intentional scars. We are stuck on  
opposite sides of the car, a couple of  
molecules stuck in a rod of light  
rapidly moving through darkness. He has the  
casual cold look of a mugger,  
alert under hooded lids. He is wearing  
red, like the inside of the body  
exposed. I am wearing dark fur, the  
whole skin of an animal taken and  
used. I look at his raw face,  
he looks at my fur coat, and I don't  
know if I am in his power —  
he could take my coat so easily, my  
briefcase, my life —  
or if he is in my power, the way I am  
living off his life, eating the steak  
he does not eat, as if I am taking  
the food from his mouth. And he is black  
and I am white, and without meaning or  
trying to I must profit from his darkness,  
the way he absorbs the murderous beams of the  
nation's head, as black cotton  
absorbs the heat of the sun and holds it. There is  
no way to know how easy this  
white skin makes my life, this  
life he could take so easily and  
break across his knee like a stick the way his  
own back is being broken, the  
rod of his soul that at birth was dark and  
fluid, rich as the head of a seedling  
ready to thrust up into any available light.