

## Test items destroy love of literature

By Susan Ohanian

I am currently compiling a list of authors whose work is used on state tests. I invite readers to send me names of publishers and authors. I need to know who holds the copyright and who granted permission. I wince when I discover Paula Danziger's "Amber Brown Goes Fourth" excerpted for the Arkansas Grade 4 test. What do fourth graders make of being interrogated about and judged by their response to a favorite author? Cynthia Rylant's "An Angel for Solomon Singer" is desecrated by Illinois, Gretel Ehrlich's "The Solace of Open Spaces" is mined for the California test. FCAT Russell Baker's Growing Up for the FCAT, and Maya Angelou's work is used in numerous states, as is Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech.

Candlewick Press gave Michigan permission to mutilate a whole chapter from Kate DiCamillo's "Because of Winn-Dixie." Well, I doubt they gave it. I don't know how many pieces of silver were involved.

Once I have a comprehensive list, one involving all states, I'll issue a call for teachers and parents to write authors and publishers, asking them to cease and desist.

Because I believe in exposing the bogus nature of the test material that is used to make high stakes decisions about the nation's schoolchildren, I post awful test questions on my website. [http://susanohanian.org/show\\_testitems.html](http://susanohanian.org/show_testitems.html)

Most often these questions are "released items," meaning they are available on state department of education websites.

Read a few of these, and you will realize why states keep most questions secret. The quality of their tests doesn't stand scrutiny.

But individual test items that not have been released by state departments of education need remain secret no longer. In *Chicago Board of Education vs. Substance and George N. Schmidt*, the 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that a newspaper cannot publish the entire contents of a standardized test but may publish sample items in order to criticize the quality of the material.

The Court ruled that:

"Copyright should not be a means by which criticism is stifled with the

backing of the courts. He [Schmidt] was entitled to criticize the [CASE] tests and to do that effectively he had to be able to quote from them, just as a parodist has to be able to quote, sometimes very extensively, from the parodied work in order to make the criticism of it that is implicit in parodying it comprehensible.”

Furthermore, the Court ruled, “judges must not police criticism with a heavy hand” to enable him to pursue an aim that the law recognizes as proper, in this case the aim of criticizing the copyrighted work effectively.

<http://www.ca7.uscourts.gov/op3.fwx?submit1=showop&caseno=03-1479.PDF>

Thank you, Substance. Thank you, George N. Schmidt.

And so with one item from the California exit exam, we begin a series whose intent is to criticize the copyrighted work effectively. These two poems and the state’s interrogations about them are from the California exit exam, 2004. They are Released Test Items and available at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/hs/documents/rtqela04rpt1.pdf> 10 CALIFORNIA STANDARD TEST 2004

Read the following two selections and think about how they are alike and how they are different.

Those Winter Sundays

by Robert Hayden

Sundays too my father got up early  
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,  
then with cracked hands that ached  
from labor in the weekday weather made  
5 banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.  
I’d wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.  
When the rooms were warm, he’d call,  
and slowly I would rise and dress,  
fearing the chronic angers of that house,  
10 Speaking indifferently to him,  
who had driven out the cold  
and polished my good shoes as well.

What did I know, what did I know  
of love's austere and lonely offices?

"Those Winter Sundays" Copyright © 1966 by Robert Hayden, from  
Collected Poems of Robert Hayden by Robert Hayden, edited by Frederick  
Glaysner. Used by permission of Liveright Publishing Corporation.

The Grammar of Silk  
by Cathy Song

1 On Saturdays in the morning  
2 my mother sent me to Mrs. Umemoto's sewing school.  
3 It was cool and airy in her basement,  
4 pleasant—a word I choose  
5 to use years later to describe  
6 the long tables where we sat  
7 and cut, pinned, and stitched,  
8 the Singer's companionable whirr,  
9 the crisp, clever bite of scissors  
10 parting like silver fish a river of calico.  
11 The school was in walking distance  
12 to Kaimuki Dry Goods  
13 where my mother purchased my supplies—  
14 small cards of buttons,  
15 zippers and rickrack packaged like licorice,  
16 lifesaver rolls of thread  
17 in fifty-yard lengths,  
18 spun from spools, tough as tackle.  
19 Seamstresses waited at the counters  
20 like librarians to be consulted.  
21 Pens and scissors dangled like awkward pendants  
22 across flat chests,  
23 a scarf of measuring tape flung across a shoulder,

24 time as a pincushion bristled at the wrist.  
25 They deciphered a dress's blueprints  
26 with an architect's keen eye.  
27 This evidently was a sanctuary,  
28 a place where women confined with children  
29 conferred, consulted the oracle,  
30 the stone tablets of the latest pattern books.  
31 Here mothers and daughters paused in symmetry,  
32 offered the proper reverence—  
33 hushed murmurings for the shaantung silk  
34 which required a certain sigh,  
35 as if it were a piece from the Ming Dynasty.  
36 My mother knew there would be no shortcuts  
37 and headed for the remnants,  
38 the leftover bundles with yardage  
39 enough for a heart-shaped pillow,  
40 a child's dirndl, a blouse without darts.  
41 Along the aisles  
42 my fingertips touched the titles—  
43 satin, tulle, velvet,  
44 peach, lavender, pistachio,  
45 sherbet-colored linings—  
46 and settled for the plain brown-and-white composition  
47 of polka dots on kettle cloth  
48 my mother held up in triumph.  
49 She was determined that I should sew  
50 as if she knew what she herself was missing,  
51 a moment when she could have come up for air—  
52 the children asleep,  
53 the dishes drying on the rack—  
54 and turned on the lamp  
55 and pulled back the curtain of sleep.  
56 To inhabit the night,

57 the night as a black cloth, white paper,  
58 a sheet of music in which she might find herself singing.  
59 On Saturdays at Mrs. Umemoto's sewing school,  
60 when I took my place beside the other girls,  
61 bent my head and went to work,  
62 my foot keeping time on the pedal,  
63 it was to learn the charitable oblivion  
64 of hand and mind as one—  
65 a refuge such music affords the maker—  
66 the pleasure of notes in perfectly measured time.

"The Grammar of Silk" is from *School Figures*, by Cathy Song, © 1994.  
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#### Released Test Questions

Which word from "The Grammar of Silk" is derived from a Latin word meaning "to stay behind"?

A dangled

B linings

C remnants

D triumph

Ohanian Comment: Note how the Standardists immediately pluck the reader from the wonderful environment of this poem and create both distance and dissonance. Instead of an invitation to savor the images, the reader is interrogated about the mechanistics of dictionary definitions. To make matters worse, the inquisitors offer obfuscation by sticking in derived from a Latin word meaning. Why not just say derived from a word meaning, . . . ? As it happens, remnant comes into English from an Old French word that originated in Latin. But is this how we want our students to read poetry? Stop and do word derivations?

The complete meaning of the word remnant is something a teacher would enjoy sharing with her students, not something she would quiz them about on a test.

Standardists label this question standard : 10RW1.0 WORD ANALYSIS, FLUENCY, AND SYSTEMATIC VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT:

Students apply their knowledge of word origins to determine the meaning of new words encountered in reading materials and use those words accurately.

10RW1.1 Vocabulary and Concept Development: Identify and use the literal and figurative meanings of words and understand word derivations. Identify and use the literal and figurative meanings of words and understand word derivations.

Note the imperatives: Apply, determine, use, identify. One expects to find Stand and salute next. And of course systematic vocabulary development is Standardisto code for their version of the New Science impost on schools. Research disproves a whole lot of what used to be done in the name of systematic vocabulary development. As it happens, this is a topic I care a whole lot about and I've written a book about it, *The Great Word Catalogue: FUNdamental Activities for Building Vocabulary*.

15 Read this sentence from lines 27–30 of “The Grammar of Silk.”

This evidently was a sanctuary, / a place where women confined with children /

conferred, consulted the oracle, / the stone tablets of the latest pattern books.

What is the meaning of the phrase “the stone tablets of the latest pattern books”?

A The pattern books at that store look as if they are made of stone.

B The pattern books are regarded as objects of great authority.

C The pattern books have been passed down through the generations.

D The pattern books are so thick that they are difficult to carry.

Ohanian Comment: I would point out to the test writers that we English teachers don't usually refer to passages from poems as sentences. I would also point out that any child who tried to lift a pattern book would know they are so thick that they are difficult to carry. Not the Standardized answer. For me, always a tactile reader more than a symbolic one, the weight of the books is much more important than any symbols anyone wants to attach. For me, thick and difficult to carry is a rich, evocative answer, calling me back to summer vacations when Grandma took my sister and me to the department store to look at pattern books so we could pick out exactly the dresses we wanted her to sew for us. I remember struggling with a heavy pattern book I wanted Grandma to look at, hoping I could carry it and manage to keep it open to the right page. I can feel that weight at this very minute and the feel is so strong I refuse to consider other answers.

Scholars who have interviewed children about their "wrong" test answers report that the children offer very convincing reasons for their "wrong" answers. Wrong answers have little to do with reading ability and much to do with social, cultural, and economic experiences. Read *Children and Reading Tests* by Clifford Hill and Eric Larsen. It will transform the way you look at tests.

16. In "The Grammar of Silk," Song is making a statement about the need for women to establish a sense of community for themselves. What does the speaker do that best illustrates this idea?

A The speaker describes the sewing group as a sanctuary in stanza 3 and the sewing school as a refuge in the last stanza.

B In stanza 2, the speaker uses such words as tough, awkward, and deciphered to illustrate the difficulty involved in sewing.

C The speaker tells about an experience that happened when she was young rather than describing a more recent experience.

D The speaker makes references to music to show that she would have rather taken music lessons than learned to sew.

Ohanian Comment: This is labeled Literary Criticism: 3.12 Analyze the way in which a work of literature is related to the themes and issues of its historical period. (Historical approach).

Funny thing. I sent this poem to a friend, asking her to try to answer the questions. She did the same thing I did, letting the poem carry her to a childhood memory.

This poem made me think of my Grandma Tom, my father's mother, whom I was very close to. She was a wonderful seamstress. She worked for many years in the 'patterns' department of the nicest downtown Des Moines department store (similar to a Marshall Field's.) I used to love visiting her there—all those beautiful pictures on the pattern packages! And I remember being so proud of her. I just called my mother to read her that poem. We both talked about the poem, and about Grandma Tom. This led to talk about my mother's grandmother who worked at a furrier's. When I was about six she said to my mother, "Shirley, this child needs a winter coat, and I'm going to make one for her." And she did. I'll never forget the wine-colored wool coat with a real fur collar she made. You can imagine how much I treasured that coat!

Does response to poetry get any better than this! The poem inspired the reader to phone her mom long distance and read and discuss the poem. This is what poems do. Their images evoke reactions and recollections. I suspect one has to be a shrunken-souled Standardisto to use a poem to interrogate kids about word definitions.

17 Both Hayden and Song imply that love

A can be expressed without words.

B is often conditional.

C creates harmony in the home.

D leads to disappointment.

Literary Response and Analysis: 3.5 Compare works that express a universal theme and provide evidence to support the ideas expressed in each work.

Maybe so, but a lot of students will concentrate on the chronic angers of Robert Hayden's poem. They will need help to get from there to the complex emotional sense of a remembered ritual and the regret of realizing love's austere and lonely offices. I would not ask any reader to do this on a test, never mind on a high-pressure, high stakes test.

18 Which universal theme is addressed in both poems?

A As they grow older, children become disillusioned by their surroundings.

B Children are to be seen and not heard.

C As they grow older, children often come to admire their parents.

D Children are responsible for themselves.

THEN the state of California throws in a few extra questions. Standardists like these stand alone questions so much they're repeating them from a previous year's test.

19. Which word is derived from the name of a German physician who used hypnotism on patients in late 18th-century Europe?

A chauvinism

B mesmerism

C Dadaism

D humanism

20. Which of these words denoting "thinness" has a negative connotation?

A slender

B lean

C scrawny

D slim

10RW1.2 Vocabulary and Concept Development: Distinguish between the denotative and connotative meanings of words and interpret the connotative power of words.

Why make the task as difficult as possible, scrambling nervous kids' brains with denotation and connotation? Why not just ask Of all these words meaning "thinness," which one is intended to be negative?

21. Which of the following words is derived from the mythological name of the Greek god of fear?

A oceanic

B. cosmetic

C. phobic

D. psychic

10RW1.3 Vocabulary and Concept Development: Identify Greek, Roman, and Norse mythology and use the knowledge to understand the origin and meaning of new words (e.g., the word "narcissistic" drawn from the myth of Narcissus and Echo).