

QUEENS' COLLEGE ESTELLE PRIZE FOR ENGLISH  
Competition Guidelines and Questions - 2021

Queens' College invites submissions for the Estelle English Prize 2021, which will be awarded to the best essay submitted by a Year 12 (Lower Sixth Form) student. Entries should answer one of the attached three questions, should be no longer than 2,500 words (including footnotes, references, illustration captions, and any other text), and should reach the College's Tutorial Office no later than Friday 15 April 2022. **The main focus should not be on something that has been or is currently being studied in the classroom or offered as A-level coursework.** The winner will receive a £500 prize; depending on the strength of the field of submissions, honourable mentions may also be made.

Each entry should be accompanied by a completed cover sheet, and submitted no later than 5 p.m. on Friday 15 April 2022 by e-mail to [tutorial.secretary@queens.cam.ac.uk](mailto:tutorial.secretary@queens.cam.ac.uk).

**Entries received after 5 p.m. on 15 April 2022 will not be considered. Entries that are over the prescribed maximum length will not be considered. Entries submitted without a cover sheet will not be considered.**

Please note that entries will not be returned and entrants may therefore wish to keep their own copy of the submitted essay.

Receipt of entries will be confirmed by email. The winner and any honourable mention(s) will be notified by letter in May 2022 and will be invited to attend the Queens' College Open Day in July 2022.

**The College does not enter into correspondence about any aspect of the competition or the results thereof. Feedback on the essays submitted is not provided.**

Prescribed essay topics for the 2021 competition (please choose **one**)

1. '[F]orcing twentieth century America into a sonnet – gosh I hate sonnets – is like putting a crab in a square box. You've got to cut his legs off to make him fit.' (William Carlos Williams, *Speaking Straight Ahead*)

Discuss the forcing or fitting of words into form, in any English verse that interests you. (You may but need not restrict yourself to the sonnet.)

2. 'In illness words seem to possess a mystic quality. We grasp what is beyond their surface meaning, gather instinctively this, that, and the other – a sound, a colour, here a stress, there a pause – which the poet, knowing words to be meagre in comparison with ideas, has strewn about his page to evoke, when collected, a state of mind which neither words can express nor the reason explain. Incomprehensibility has an enormous power over us in illness, more legitimately perhaps than the upright will allow. In health meaning has encroached upon sound. Our intelligence domineers over our senses. But in illness, with the police off duty, we creep beneath some obscure poem by Mallarmé or Donne, some phrase in Latin or Greek, and the words give out their scent, and ripple like leaves, and chequer us with light and shadow, and then, if at last we grasp the meaning, it is all the richer for having travelled slowly up with all the bloom upon its wings.' (Virginia Woolf, 'On Being Ill')

Write about the pleasure and the value of incomprehensibility, in the reading of any poetry or prose that you cherish. (You may but need not refer to the Woolf passage in your answer.)

3. Consider the representation of the weather in one or both of the following poems.

(i) Elizabeth Bishop, *Song for the Rainy Season* (1960)

Hidden, oh hidden  
in the high fog  
the house we live in,  
beneath the magnetic rock,  
rain-, rainbow-ridden,  
where blood-black  
bromelias, lichens,  
owls, and the lint  
of the waterfalls cling,  
familiar, unbidden.

In a dim age  
of water  
the brook sings loud  
from a rib cage  
of giant fern; vapor  
climbs up the thick growth

effortlessly, turns back,  
holding them both,  
house and rock,  
in a private cloud.

At night, on the roof,  
blind drops crawl  
and the ordinary brown  
owl gives us proof  
he can count:  
five times – always five –  
he stamps and takes off  
after the fat frogs that,  
shrilling for love,  
clamber and mount.

House, open house  
to the white dew  
and the milk-white sunrise  
kind to the eyes,  
to membership  
of silver fish, mouse,  
bookworms,  
big moths; with a wall  
for the mildew's  
ignorant map,

darkened and tarnished  
by the warm touch  
of the warm breath,  
maculate, cherished,  
rejoice! For a later  
era will differ.  
(O difference that kills,  
or intimidates, much  
of all our small shadowy  
life!) Without water

the great rock will stare  
unmagnetized, bare,  
no longer wearing  
rainbows or rain,  
the forgiving air  
and the high fog gone;  
the owls will move on  
and the several  
waterfalls shrivel  
in the steady sun.

(ii) Frank O'Hara, 'A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island' (1958)

The Sun woke me this morning loud  
and clear, saying 'Hey! I've been  
trying to wake you up for fifteen  
minutes. Don't be so rude, you are  
only the second poet I've ever chosen  
to speak to personally

so why  
aren't you more attentive? If I could  
burn you through the window I would  
to wake you up. I can't hang around  
here all day.'

'Sorry, Sun, I stayed  
up late last night talking to Hal.'

'When I woke up Mayakovsky he was  
a lot more prompt' the Sun said  
petulantly. 'Most people are up  
already waiting to see if I'm going  
to put in an appearance.'

I tried  
to apologize 'I missed you yesterday.'  
'That's better' he said. 'I didn't  
know you'd come out.' 'You may be  
wondering why I've come so close?'  
'Yes' I said beginning to feel hot  
wondering if maybe he wasn't burning me  
anyway.

'Frankly I wanted to tell you  
I like your poetry. I see a lot  
on my rounds and you're okay. You may  
not be the greatest thing on earth, but  
you're different. Now, I've heard some  
say you're crazy, they being excessively  
calm themselves to my mind, and other  
crazy poets think that you're a boring  
reactionary. Not me.

Just keep on  
like I do and pay no attention. You'll  
find that people always will complain  
about the atmosphere, either too hot  
or too cold too bright or too dark, days  
too short or too long.

If you don't appear  
at all one day they think you're lazy  
or dead. Just keep right on, I like it.

And don't worry about your lineage  
poetic or natural. The Sun shines on  
the jungle, you know, on the tundra

the sea, the ghetto. Where you were  
I knew it and saw you moving. I was waiting  
for you to get to work.

And now that you  
are making your own days, so to speak,  
even if no one reads you but me  
you won't be depressed. Not  
everyone can look up, even at me. It  
hurts their eyes.'

'Oh Sun, I'm so grateful to you!'

'Thanks and remember I'm watching. It's  
easier for me to speak to you out  
here. I don't have to slide down  
between buildings to get your ear.  
I know you love Manhattan, but  
you ought to look up more often.

And  
always embrace things, people earth  
sky stars, as I do, freely and with  
the appropriate sense of space. That  
is your inclination, known in the heavens  
and you should follow it to hell, if  
necessary, which I doubt.

Maybe we'll  
speak again in Africa, of which I too  
am specially fond. Go back to sleep now  
Frank, and I may leave a tiny poem  
in that brain of yours as my farewell.'

'Sun, don't go!' I was awake  
at last. 'No, go I must, they're calling  
me.'

'Who are they?'

Rising he said 'Some  
day you'll know. They're calling to you  
too.' Darkly he rose, and then I slept.