

<b>EAE 0422 A</b>	<b>Sujet Jury</b>	<b>Sujet Candidat</b>		<b>Code Sujet</b>	<b>CLG 13</b>
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**Your main commentary should be focused on *negation*. Other topics may also be addressed.**

In the event, not many people did like Morris Zapp's lecture, and several members of the audience walked out before he had finished. Rupert Sutcliffe, obliged as chairman to sit facing the audience, assumed an aspect of glazed impassivity, but by imperceptible  
5 degrees the corners of his mouth turned down at more and more acute angles and his spectacles slid further and further down his nose as the discourse proceeded. Morris Zapp delivered it striding up and down the platform with his notes in one hand and a fat cigar in the other.

10 "You see before you," he began, "a man who once believed in the possibility of interpretation. That is, I thought that the goal of reading was to establish the meaning of texts. I used to be a Jane Austen man. I think I can say in all modesty that I was *the* Jane Austen man. I wrote five books on Jane Austen, every one of which  
15 was trying to establish what her novels meant – and, naturally, to prove that no one had properly understood what they meant before. Then I began a commentary on the works of Jane Austen, the aim of which was to be utterly exhaustive, to examine the novels from every conceivable angle – historical, biographical, rhetorical,  
20 mythical, structural, Freudian, Jungian, Marxist, existentialist, Christian, allegorical, ethical, phenomenological, archetypal, you name it. So that when each commentary was written, there would be *nothing further* to say about the novel in question.

"Of course, I never finished it. The project was not so much Utopian  
25 as self-defeating. By that I don't just mean that if successful it would have eventually put us all out of business. I mean that it couldn't succeed because it isn't possible, and it isn't possible because of the nature of language itself, in which meaning is constantly being transferred from one signifier to another and can  
30 never be absolutely possessed.

"To understand a message is to decode it. Language is a code. *But every decoding is another encoding*. If you say something to me I check that I have understood your message by saying it back to you in my own words, that is, different words from the ones you used,

35 for if I repeat your own words exactly you will doubt whether I have really understood you. But if I use *my* own words it follows that I have changed *your* meaning, however slightly; and even if I were, deviantly, to indicate my comprehension by repeating back to you your own unaltered words, that is no guarantee that I have  
40 duplicated your meaning in my head, because I bring a different experience of language, literature and non-verbal reality to those words, therefore they mean something different to me from what they mean to you. And if you think I have not understood the meaning of your message, you do not simply repeat it in the same  
45 words, you try to explain it in different words, different from the ones you used originally; but then the *it* is no longer the *it* that you started with. And for that matter, you are not the *you* that you started with. Time has moved on since you opened your mouth to speak, the molecules in your body have changed, what you  
50 intended to say has been superseded by what you did say, and that has already become part of your personal history, imperfectly remembered. Conversation is like playing tennis with a ball made of Krazy Putty that keeps coming back over the net in a different shape.

55 "Reading, of course, is different from conversation. It is more passive in the sense that we can't interact with the text, we can't affect the development of the text by our own words, since the text's words are already given. That is what perhaps encourages the quest for interpretation. If the words are fixed once and for all, on  
60 the page, may not their meaning be fixed also? Not so, because the same axiom, *every decoding is another encoding*, applies to literary criticism even more stringently than it does to ordinary spoken discourse. In ordinary spoken discourse, the endless cycle of encoding-decoding-encoding may be terminated by an action, as  
65 when for instance I say "The door is open" and you say "Do you mean you would like me to shut it?" and I say "If you don't mind", and you shut the door – we may be satisfied that at a certain level my meaning has been understood.