

Masters of Arts in English
Comprehensive Examination Fall 2004

Section 1: In a full paragraph, answer ten of the following twelve questions. This section is worth 100 of 300 points, and you have one hour to complete it.

1. Drawing from evidence in her prologue and tale, what does the Wife of Bath reveal about her own desires about sovereignty in marriage?
2. Idleness and Labor are allegorically represented in the beginning of the Prologue. How do these relate to the Second Nun's activity in telling her tale?
3. Discuss Prospero's relation to Caliban, given that *The Tempest* was written in the context of European exploration of the "savage" Americas.
4. In *The Dunciad*, what sort of imagery is used to describe the figure of Dullness and what is the significance of that imagery?
5. Why does Pope include footnotes and a complex scholarly apparatus in *The Dunciad*?
6. Describe several instances in Franklin's *Autobiography* that portray Franklin as a representative, rather than extraordinary, human being. In other words, what events imply that his success is not the result of his own immense ability, but is something any free citizen could achieve?
7. In *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923), D. H. Lawrence claimed that Franklin had created an "unlovely, snuff-colored little ideal, or automaton, of a pattern American . . . [a] dry, moral, utilitarian little democrat." Based on your reading of Franklin's *Autobiography*, how accurate is Lawrence's assessment of Franklin's character?
8. Explain what Blake meant when he said, "The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it."
9. Does *Pride and Prejudice* undermine or promote the economic class structure of English society?
10. In his review of *Twice-Told Tales*, what are Poe's "rules" for tale-writing, and do they make sense?
11. Literal and figurative metamorphoses play prevalent roles in *The Satanic Verses*. Why is metamorphosis such a dominant motif in the novel?
12. The title character in *Beloved* is often considered to be a symbol. What might she represent? How does this representation influence the novel's meaning?

Section 2: This section is worth 200 of 300 points, and you have two hours to complete it.

In the following passage from "The Poetic Principle" Poe battles what he calls "the heresies of The Didactic."

It has been assumed, tacitly and avowedly, directly and indirectly, that the ultimate object of all Poetry is Truth. Every poem, it is said, should inculcate a moral, and by this moral is the poetical merit of the work to be adjudged. We Americans especially have patronized this happy idea, and we Bostonians very especially have developed it in full. We have taken it into our heads that to write a poem simply for the poem's sake, and to acknowledge such to have been our design, would be to confess ourselves radically wanting in the true poetic dignity and force:-- but the simple fact is that would we but permit ourselves to look into our own souls we should immediately there discover that under the sun there neither exists nor can exist any work more thoroughly dignified, more supremely noble, than this very poem, this poem per se, this poem which is a poem and nothing more, this poem written solely for the poem's sake.

With as deep a reverence for the True as ever inspired the bosom of man, I would nevertheless limit, in some measure, its modes of inculcation. I would limit to enforce them. I would not enfeeble them by dissipation. The demands of Truth are severe. She has no sympathy with the myrtles. All that which is so indispensable in Song is precisely all that with which she has nothing whatever to do. It is but making her a flaunting paradox to wreath her in gems and flowers. In enforcing a truth we need severity rather than efflorescence of language. We must be simple, precise, terse. We must be cool, calm, unimpassioned. In a word, we must be in that mood which, as nearly as possible, is the exact converse of the poetical. He must be blind indeed who does not perceive the radical and chasmal difference between the truthful and the poetical modes of inculcation. He must be theory-mad beyond redemption who, in spite of these differences, shall still persist in attempting to reconcile the obstinate oils and waters of Poetry and Truth.

Dividing the world of mind into its three most immediately obvious distinctions, we have the Pure Intellect, Taste, and the Moral Sense. I place Taste in the middle, because it is just this position which in the mind it occupies. It holds intimate relations with either extreme; but from the Moral Sense is separated by so faint a difference that Aristotle has not hesitated to place some of its operations among the virtues themselves. Nevertheless we find the offices of the trio marked with a sufficient distinction. Just as the Intellect concerns itself with Truth, so Taste informs us of the Beautiful, while the Moral Sense is regardful of Duty. Of this latter, while Conscience teaches the obligation, and Reason the expediency, Taste contents herself with displaying the charms:-- waging war upon Vice solely on the ground of her deformity- her disproportion- her animosity to the fitting, to the appropriate, to the harmonious- in a word, to Beauty.

An immortal instinct deep within the spirit of man is thus plainly a sense of the Beautiful. This it is which administers to his delight in the manifold forms, and sounds, and odors and sentiments amid which he exists. And just as the lily is repeated in the lake, or the eyes of

Amaryllis in the mirror, so is the mere oral or written repetition of these forms, and sounds, and colors, and odors, and sentiments a duplicate source of delight. But this mere repetition is not poetry. He who shall simply sing, with however glowing enthusiasm, or with however vivid a truth of description, of the sights, and sounds, and odors, and colors, and sentiments which greet him in common with all mankind- he, I say, has yet faded to prove his divine title. There is still a something in the distance which he has been unable to attain. We have still a thirst unquenchable, to allay which he has not shown us the crystal springs. This thirst belongs to the immortality of Man. It is at once a consequence and an indication of his perennial existence. It is the desire of the moth for the star. It is no mere appreciation of the Beauty before us, but a wild effort to reach the Beauty above. Inspired by an ecstatic prescience of the glories beyond the grave, we struggle by multiform combinations among the things and thoughts of Time to attain a portion of that Loveliness whose very elements perhaps appertain to eternity alone. And thus when by Poetry, or when by Music, the most entrancing of the poetic moods, we find ourselves melted into tears, we weep then... through a certain petulant, impatient sorrow at our inability to grasp now, wholly, here on earth, at once and for ever, those divine and rapturous joys of which through the poem, or through the music, we attain to but brief and indeterminate glimpses.

The struggle to apprehend the supernal Loveliness- this struggle, on the part of souls fittingly constituted- has given to the world all that which it (the world) has ever been enabled at once to understand and to feel as poetic....

To recapitulate then:- I would define, in brief, the Poetry of words as *The Rhythmical Creation of Beauty*. Its sole arbiter is Taste. With the Intellect or with the Conscience it has only collateral relations. Unless incidentally, it has no concern whatever either with Duty or with Truth.

In linking poetry and music, Poe stresses that the Beauty each art "struggle[s] to apprehend" is unearthly and eternal. In arguing that poetry truly understood has everything to do with "supernal Loveliness" and virtually nothing to do with "Duty or with Truth," Poe provocatively breaks with tradition. So provocatively, in fact, that it is hard to take him seriously. For, to quote Chaucer out of context, "How shal the world be served?" if not by serious literary artists, from Jane Austen to Toni Morrison, from Alexander Pope to Salman Rushdie, who struggle with the moral and philosophical issues of their day and of all days?

For this essay, your task is essentially to create a counter poetics to that advanced by Poe by explaining the moral vision behind three of the works you have prepared—one from early British (Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Pope), one from later British (Austen, Blake, Rushdie), and one from American (Franklin, Morrison, and Poe himself*). Your essay must cover works from at least two different genres.

* If you choose to write on Poe, you may discuss his ideas in greater depth to contrast with the visions of the other authors. Or you may even say that the difference the question presumes is more apparent than real!