

Masters of Arts in English
Comprehensive Examination Spring 2005

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. How does the Wife use the story of Midas as an exemplum in her Tale? What aspects of the original myth does she change, and to what effect?
2. Discuss the physical evidence of Cecilia's sanctity in the Second Nun's Tale.
3. Using at least two relationships from the play, discuss *The Tempest's* representation of "civilization." What does it mean to "civilize" and what tensions, if any, do you detect between those who conquer and those who are "natives"?
4. Discuss the issue of gender in *The Tempest*. Does the play's representation of women preclude any sense of their agency?
5. Discuss the theme of education in *The Dunciad*.
6. Discuss how Benjamin Franklin describes his religious beliefs in the *Autobiography*.
7. Comment on the grammar, syntax, and meaning of this passage from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: "Damn braces: Bless relaxes."
8. Which is the stronger determinant influencing Elizabeth, gender or class?
9. In Poe's theory of poetry, how are "truth," "beauty," and "music" related to or opposed to each other?
10. Describe some of the ways Poe sets himself up as an iconoclast (one who challenges cherished beliefs) in his literary theory and criticism.
11. What does Rushdie's narrative suggest about the experience(s) of migration, or what he calls "the migrant condition"?
12. "It was not a story to pass on" has been called the refrain of *Beloved*. Discuss how Morrison supports or undermines this repeated phrase.

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

Years ago in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye distinguished between fictional and thematic elements in works of literature, with “fictional” having to do with the work’s protagonist and his or her society and “thematic” with the author and his or her readership. Some works are more impersonal and therefore primarily fictional, while others are so deeply concerned with an author’s point of view that “a relation with the reader is established which cuts across the story.” Frye went on to argue that, in fiction, protagonists may either be integrated within society, or they may be somehow isolated or alienated. The former works are comic, the latter tragic. Similarly with thematic elements, “the poet may write as an individual, emphasizing the separateness of his personality and the distinctness of his vision. This attitude produces most lyrics and essays.... The frequency of the moods of protest, complaint, ridicule, and loneliness ... in such works may perhaps indicate a rough analogy to the tragic modes of fiction. Or the poet may devote himself to being a spokesman of his society, which means ... that a poetic knowledge and expressive power which is latent or needed in his society comes to articulation in him.”

For this essay, think about at least three of the works you have read and try to categorize them according to Frye’s distinctions of fictional and thematic, comic and tragic. You might think for instance, of Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath* and *Saint Cecelia*. Do these two characters reflect a unified thematic vision? Is that vision at odds, or at one with Chaucer’s society? Or think of *Pride and Prejudice*. Does the author present a critique of her society, or is the work too impersonal for anyone to say?

These are just two of the works you’ve read, but these examples ought to lead you to thinking about the other texts you’ve prepared. Clearly, too, much of the current criticism of these different works addresses these questions, also. Don’t worry if the elements of different works seem to militate against your filing them neatly into one category or another. What we are interested in seeing here is how perceptively you are able to identify different thrusts or tendencies within the texts you have studied for this exam.

In writing this essay, you must use at least one work each from early British, later British, and American literatures. And you must also use works from at least two different genres.