

Junior Comprehensive Examination, Spring Term 2012
DAY ONE

Examiners: Deborah Martinsen, Columbia University
Elizabeth Scharffenberger, Columbia University

Over three days you will have the chance to think and write about the texts you have read dealing with ancient, medieval, and twentieth-century culture. Please think both analytically and creatively in your answers to the following questions. We encourage you to use examples that range across the various periods you have studied. Each of your answers should make general claims supported by specific evidence and have an overall, coherent argument. Feel free to consult the primary texts as you write up your responses.

Please refer to the guidelines for deadline and formatting instructions. Be sure to include your name and the exam day, and to number your pages. Do your best to observe specified page limitations.

Examination Day One:

Part 1. Comment on three of the following passages in detail. If you wish, follow up your commentaries by exploring linkages between two (or, if you are so bold, all three) of the passages in relation to one another. Limit yourself to 1800 words total (about six double-spaced pages).

- 1) Aristophanes, *Lysistrata* 1106-1215 (pp. 64-9 in Sarah Ruden's translation).
- 2) Rumi, "Exordium: the song of the reed," lines 1-34.
- 3) Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, ch. 5 (pp. 95-100), starting "The existence of this inclination to aggression ..." and ending "One only wonders, with concern, what the Soviets will do after they have wiped out their bourgeois."
- 4) Akhmatova, "Requiem"

Part 2. Choose one of the following and write a well-organized essay approximately 1800 words in length. We encourage you to focus on three texts so that your essay has both breadth and depth. Try not to repeat what you have written about in Part 1.

1. Discuss the purposes, hazards, lessons, and transformative potentials of journeys.

2. Pentheus asks Dionysus: "Now then/ Who are you and from where?" (*The Bacchae*, l.459)

How does our knowledge of an individual's origins contribute to our understanding of that person or of the text in which s/he figures? Can an individual's origins motivate or explain her/his actions? Does it?

3. What kinds of knowledge do human beings need? On what guides, methods, and resources should human beings rely in their quests to gain understanding and avoid error?

4. What do moments of sharing food reveal about individuals or groups? Why do writers incorporate the description or enactment of such moments in their texts?

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Examination Day Two:

Part 1. Choose either A or B. Comment on three of the following passages in detail. If you wish, follow up your commentaries by exploring linkages between two (or, if you are so bold, all three) of the passages in relation to one another. Limit yourself to 1800 words total (about six double-spaced pages).

- A.
- 1) Homer, *Odyssey*, 9. 42-196.
 - 2) Virgil, *Aeneid* 2. 40-198 (Ruden translation, pp. 25-30).
 - 3) Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 26.
 - 4) Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, Chapter 11 "The Canto of Ulysses" pp. 112-5, starting "... The canto of Ulysses." to end of chapter.
- B.
- 1) Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 3.5.7-22 (pp. 38-40 in Terence Irwin's translation, beginning with "There would seem to be evidence in favor of our view ..." and ending with "... states are voluntary.")
 - 2) St. Perpetua, *The Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity*, chs. 4-6.
 - 3) Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, pp. 80-81 starting "Nevertheless it is only on the empty days when I am cast wholly upon myself . . ." to "The protecting wings of a guardian albatross or the black shape of a coward crow afraid to strike while its prey yet breathes?"
 - 4) Hemon, "The Coin," opening and closing paragraphs

Part 2. Choose one of the following and write a well-organized essay approximately 1800 words in length. We encourage you to focus on three texts so that your essay has both breadth and depth. Try not to repeat what you have written about in Part 1 or on Day 1.

1. The examination of “virtue” or “excellence” (Greek: *aretê*) in Plato’s *Protagoras* illustrates the great importance attached to courage since ancient times, and, at the same time, the great variation in the ways people can conceive of courage.

What are fruitful ways of thinking about courage? Are some ways of conceiving of courage more meaningful, or more beneficial, than others?

2. Discuss the significance of the ways in which authors and characters pay attention to—or ignore—the needs and concerns of children.

3. Given that shame is an emotion of self-assessment, how individuals respond to their own experience of shame or how they respond when witnessing another’s experience of shame may reveal a great deal about their character.

How do different writers use moments of shame and/or responses to it in their texts?

4. Compare and contrast the interests in property and ownership, and (where applicable) in related matters such as “property rights” and human tendencies toward possessiveness, in the texts you have chosen. One of your goals should be to explore how concerns about property, etc., figure significantly in these works.

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Please refer to the guidelines for deadline and formatting instructions. Be sure to include your name and the exam day, and to number your pages. Do your best to observe specified page limitations.

Examination Day Three:

Part 1. Comment on three of the following passages in detail. If you wish, follow up your commentaries by exploring linkages between two (or, if you are so bold, all three) of the passages in relation to one another. Limit yourself to 1800 words total (about six double-spaced pages).

- 1) Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, book 2, chs. 51-55, (Hammond trans., pp. 98-100)
- 2) Plato, *Apology*, 29b-31a, beginning with "Suppose, then, that you acquit me. . ." and ending with "... unless God in his care for you sends someone to take my place." (Penguin trans.)
- 3) Diogenes, *Life of Diogenes the Cynic*, VI. 52-60.
- 4) Al Ghazali, *Deliverance from Error*, chapters 102-11.
- 5) Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir's speeches to Estragon regarding Pozzo's call for help in Act II, starting "Let us not waste time in idle discussion!"

Part 2. Choose one of the following and write a well-organized essay approximately 1800 words in length. We encourage you to focus on three texts so that your essay has both breadth and depth. Try not to repeat what you have written about in Part 1 or on Days 1 and 2.

1. Much of the discourse one hears today in the media and in political speeches stresses freedom as the ultimate goal of governmental policies, military interventions, religious missions, and so forth. Many of the texts you have read in this program also uphold freedom as a principal goal of human undertakings. But, if one were to play devil's advocate, one might wonder:

- Is this emphasis on freedom merited?
- What prospects do people actually have for achieving freedom?
- And, most basically, how exactly is freedom to be meaningfully defined?

How would you respond to the "devil's advocate" who poses such questions about the definition and possibilities of "freedom"?

2. Writers often establish contrasting geographical locations as reference points. Some locations represent the known and familiar, others the unknown and unfamiliar. Give examples of how contrasts between locations help to shape reader response. Discuss how the representational, thematic, metaphysical or metaliterary dimensions of the geographical locations connect to larger issues in the works.

3. When Augustine's friend Alypius attends a gladiatorial spectacle, albeit against his will, he

imbibed madness. Without any awareness of what was happening to him, he found delight in the murderous contest and was inebriated by bloodthirsty pleasure. He was not now the person who had come in, but just one of the crowd which he had joined, and a true member of the group which had brought him (Bk 6, chpt 13).

In this description, Augustine provides a classic illustration of peer pressure.

How do the texts you have chosen represent the power of the crowd? Negatively? Positively? Neutrally? Why?

4. Many of the texts that you have read in this program draw attention to the distress, suffering, confusion, and (sometimes) self-inflicted harm that life's difficult journey can bring to human beings. What means or strategies do the texts you have chosen offer on relief and /or redemption from various kinds of suffering and distress? What insights do they provide into the coping mechanisms that are available to human beings as they negotiate great challenges and (at times) great pain?

5. Choosing works from three different genres, discuss how authors, historical individuals, or characters employ memory to constitute real or imaginative identities.