

College of Letters
Wesleyan University

Junior Comprehensive Examination, Spring Term 2014

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Over three days you will have the chance to think and write about the texts you have read dealing with ancient, medieval, and 20th Century culture. 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. In some cases, where the texts obviously require or allow it, your essays may be based around exegesis and interpretation; in other cases we expect analysis and criticism. At least some of your essays must consider whether an idea or view contained in the text *is plausible*. 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 *two* of the following passages in detail. Limit yourself to 1800 words total (about six double-spaced pages).

1. Sappho (M.L. West) pages 39-41 (“The Muses”) and p. 45 (“On a Girl”).
2. Homer *Iliad* 3.1-75 (The Greek and Trojan armies gather to meet; Hector and Paris).
3. Virgil *Aeneid* 12. 1049-1271 (the end of the *Aeneid* and the final scene between Aeneas and Turnus).

Part 2. Choose one of the following discussion prompts and write a well-organized essay approximately 1800 words in length. We encourage you to use several different texts, and where appropriate to consider dialogue and disagreements between authors and between different historical periods and cultures. Do not feel compelled to incorporate discussions of more than *three* texts, although you may do so if you feel that it suits the structure of your essay. We are more interested in ideas, reactions, and arguments than in summaries of the material. Try not to repeat what you have written about in Part 1.

1. Each ancient writer sets up a different system of evaluation for what is most important and beautiful in life. While Sappho says in one poem, “Some say an army on horseback, some say on foot, and some say ships are the most beautiful things on this black earth, but I say it is whatever you love” (poem 31), Homer would answer this question quite differently. Using Sappho and Homer, discuss what the different systems of evaluation are based on, why each author values what he or she does, and which seems to you to be the most reasonable and workable.

2. Simone Weil called the *Iliad* “the poem of Force,” and she said, “force is that which makes a thing of whoever submits to it. Exercised to the extreme, it makes a human being a thing quite literally, that is, a dead body. Someone was there and, the next moment, no one.” Do you agree? Discuss this idea in reference to two or three texts you have read.
3. Discuss the role of rage and revenge in ancient literature, especially in epic. Is rage a part of what makes a hero heroic? Is revenge ever, or always, justified? Pick two passages in which revenge is taken to discuss this topic in detail and to refer to specific situations.

Examination Day Two:

Part 1. Comment on *two* of the following passages in detail. Limit yourself to 1800 words total (about six double-spaced pages).

1. Euripides *Bacchae* lines 266-328, 490-511 (Teiresias on the gods, power and madness; Pentheus and Dionysus meet).
2. Sophocles *Antigone* 683-723 (Haemon to Creon about Antigone being a hero).
3. Perpetua *Passion* section 10 (her fourth dream-vision).

Part 2. Choose one of the following discussion prompts and write a well-organized essay approximately 1800 words in length. Assume the same guidelines as for yesterday’s Part 2. Also, try not to repeat what you have written in any previous art of the examination.

1. Reflect on the nature of power. Who has it? Is power real? How can it be wielded or should it be wielded? What happens to those who have it? Is there a difference between male and female power? Refer especially to Greek tragedy (but also to any other text you want to bring in).
2. What does it mean to be a hero? Who can be a hero? Is there a transcultural or transhistorical concept of heroism? Can both men and women be heroes? Choose two passages to illustrate your arguments.
3. Choose two passages from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Perpetua’s *Passion*, Plato’s *Symposium*, or Virgil’s *Aeneid*, and discuss the significance of the human body, changing bodies, and the transcendence of the body.

Examination Day Three:

Part 1. Compare the opening of Geoffrey Chaucer’s “Prologue” to *The Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1387) with the opening and second stanzas of T.S. Eliot’s “The Wasteland” (1922). Comment on how and why April would go from the month of rebirth, redemption and regeneration to being “the cruelest month.” Keeping in mind the mission of Chaucer’s pilgrims and Eliot’s post-World War I-era poem, discuss how we get from Chaucer’s hopeful Crusaders setting out from Canterbury to Eliot’s “heap of broken images.” Limit yourself to 1800 words total (about six double-spaced pages, including examples).

Opening lines of Chaucer's "Prologue" to *The Canterbury Tales*

When April with his showers sweet with fruit
The drought of March has pierced unto the root
And bathed each vein with liquor that has power
To generate therein and sire the flower (lines 1-4)

Opening lines of first two stanzas of Eliot's "The Wasteland" (lines 1-4, 19-24)

April is the cruelest month, breeding
Lilacs to of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.

. . .

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water . . .

Part 2. Choose any two of the following four sets of discussion questions and write a short reflection on each (about 900 words or three double-spaced pages each). Along the way, consider contemporaneous world events, art and literary movements, political and cultural upheavals.

1. In her 1924 essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," Virginia Woolf wrote, "On or about December, 1910, human character changed. I am not saying that one went out, as one might into a garden, and there saw that a rose had flowered, or that a hen had laid an egg. The change was not sudden and definite like that. But a change there was . . . All human relations have shifted—those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature. Let us agree to place one of these changes about the year 1910." For many, Virginia Woolf was referring to the birth of "the modern"—in fiction, in character, in aesthetic sensibility. How is Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* a modern novel, a war novel, a novel of psychological change?
2. Thinking about Walter Benjamin's "Theses on History," what do you believe is Benjamin's most interesting "thesis on History"? Why would he have a problem with history-writing that "redeems historical events" with meaning? Where does meaning come from in historical-writing? From the events themselves, from the writing about events, or from both events and their representation? Discuss.
3. Is Leni Riefenstahl's "Triumph of the Will" a disinterested "documentary film" as the acclaimed documentarian always insisted, and if so, what exactly is the film documenting? Or is it something else, perhaps even an apologia for and explanation of the Nazis' rise to power and world view? Reflect on the first few moments of this film

and the voice-over accompanying images of Hitler's plane as it skims over the church-dotted landscape and through the clouds on its way to one of his massively-orchestrated Nuremberg rallies. A voice-over narrative introduces the scene: "Twenty years after the World War [I], 16 years after the crucifixion of Germany, 19 months after the beginning of Germany's Renaissance, Hitler flew to Nuremberg to greet his columns of followers." The plane suddenly appears from the clouds and glides over the countryside, its shadow in the form of a cross. Please discuss.

4. In Chapter 2 of Primo Levi's memoir *Survival in Auschwitz* (1958), the survivor laments language's inability to express the "demolition of a man" he found as a prisoner in the Nazi death camp: "Then for the first time we became aware that our language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of a man . . . It is not possible to sink lower than this; no human condition is more miserable than this, nor could it conceivably be so. Nothing belongs to us anymore; they have taken away our clothes, our shoes, even our hair; if we speak, they will not listen to us, and if they listen, they will not understand." Please reflect on language's capacity to represent violence and the inhumane; the limits and possibilities in language to describe extreme and inchoate experience.