

**Masters of Arts in English
Comprehensive Examination**

Fall 2008

***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. You may do these in any order, but be sure to number your responses. For the two that you choose not to do, write the number and then the word “omit.”*

1. Support or refute the idea that the Dreamer in *The Book of the Duchess* is ignorant and naïve in his dealings with the Man in Black.
2. What notion or notions of God animate Dickinson’s verse?
3. The characters in O’Brien’s book “carry” many things, but the stories are unified by the fact that they all carry “the common secret of cowardice.” How is this explored?
4. Defoe presents himself as the “editor” of Moll’s own story; the title page declares that the text is “written from [Moll’s] own memorandums.” How do truth and fictional artifice commingle in the book?
5. “Becky Sharpe is the most morally reprehensible character in English fiction.” Defend or refute this assertion.
6. When Douglass writes, “You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man,” what does he understand a man to be?
7. Heaney has been called “the poet of the bogs.” His verse radiates a very tactile, even sensuous apprehension of rural life. Yet it also shimmers with a symbolic resonance that Heaney does not directly address in the poem. Analyze this contrast between the palpable details and the suggestive meaning in his verse.
8. We know that revenge was a common catalyst for the plots of tragedies in Webster’s day. But what about the intended outcome of revenge – justice? Discuss the relationship between revenge and justice in *The Duchess of Malfi*.
9. Unlike Poe, Emerson, or a number of other nineteenth-century figures, Dickinson did not make direct statements about the nature of poetry. Could one, however, extrapolate a theory of poetry from her verse? Do the poems comment, directly or indirectly, on what Poe called “the poetic principle?”
10. In recalling his mistress’s attempts to teach him to read, Douglass notes that, ultimately, “slavery proved as injurious to her as it did to me.” How so?

11. Analyze the concept of intertextuality in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. For example, Shakespeare is an obvious source/context for the play. How is Shakespeare used? What other texts “appear” in the play and how are they used?

12. How do we understand Moll’s character in terms of the imagery and discourse of contracts, commercial transactions, and the law in general which pervades the book?

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

As is typical of postmodern and/or absurdist drama, the characters in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* seem trapped in an inscrutable plot that bewilders and frustrates them at nearly every turn. Alternative avenues are pursued only to be closed off; contingency plans are laid then washed away in the wake of new, unforeseen events. The characters are thus often beset by confusion, self-contradiction, and doubt, even as they struggle mightily to assert the primacy of the Self and gain control of their destinies. Some succeed; others do not, or cannot, depending on the circumstances.

In several of the texts on the reading list, authors examine this paradox of free will in a deterministic world. Using at least three different works from at least two different genres, write an essay in which you analyze the question of to what extent individuals can control their lives in a clockwork universe. You must choose one work from pre-1800 British literature, one from post-1800 British literature, and one from American literature.

Note: the discussion of poets on the list would best be served if more than one poem were included in the analysis.