

**Masters of Arts in English**  
**Comprehensive Examination Spring 2006**

*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. The setting of *Dancing at Lughnasa* is “The home of the Mundy family, two miles outside Ballybeg, County Donegal, Ireland.” The place name Ballybeg is from the Irish “Baile Beag,” which means both “small town” and “small home” (“Baile” means both “town” and “home”). Explain how themes or issues in *Dancing at Lughnasa* relate to the Mundy household, the suggestively-named village, and/or Irish society in general.
2. *The Book of Margery Kempe* is often called the first autobiography in English. In what ways is this classification appropriate, and in what ways is it problematic?
3. What connections in *King Lear* do we see between the welfare of the monarch’s body and that of the state? What do these connections suggest about the importance of personal governance?
4. Identify and comment on “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.”
5. How are the claims made in Whitman’s Preface to the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* reflected or refracted (i.e., bent or reshaped) in the poetry of the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*?
6. Is Milton’s Samson a hero and saint, or a fanatic terrorist? The two interpretations are now often referred to as traditional and revisionist—the latter following a widely-read article by John Carey on the anniversary of 9/11. Respond to the problem of reading *Samson Agonistes* after the events of September 11, 2001.
7. Discuss Equiano’s complex relationship to Christianity in the narrative, as he both cites Christianity as an inspiration for his spiritual self-discovery and also critiques the hypocrisy of upholding the institution of slavery in supposedly Christian states. Do you feel he ever reconciles his sometimes conflicting feelings about Christianity?
8. Discuss Enoch Emory’s quest to find a Christ substitute in *Wise Blood*. What sort of substitutes does he seek out and how? How does O’Connor reveal the inefficacy of these substitutes in the novel?
9. Dickens evidently does not have much respect for Skimpole, the irresponsible aesthete. Referring specifically to relevant aspects of the novel, discuss how Dickens uses *Bleak House* to enact a different conception of the role of the artist.

10. Margery Kempe was challenged, in her day, by the Church for possibly holding heretical views. Which of her views did the Church find troubling? What finally confirmed her views as orthodox?
11. Should we view Cordelia as an empowered or a victimized figure? Or both? Define your terms of argument and make a case based on the play's portrayal of Lear's youngest daughter.
12. What is the main difference between the text of "The Ancient Mariner" in the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, and the version of the poem in the second edition?

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

One of the earliest and most famous pieces of literary criticism is actually a criticism of literature—Plato's contention that poets have no place in the ideal city. At the start of Book X of the *Republic*, Plato wraps up his case against literature. Socrates argues that poets need readers, and in order to get them they typically focus on extremes, whether pitiful, or laughable, or erotically alluring. On the other hand, because the "prudent and quiet character ... is neither easily imitated nor, when imitated, easily understood," virtuous people who have their emotions under control rarely become subjects of literary works. Wallowing in the comic, or erotic, or tragic emotions raised by art, readers find themselves much more willing to express feelings they might otherwise suppress. Thus, literature "fosters and waters" within men and women those emotions that ought rather to be governed by reason and, correspondingly, "destroys the calculating [i.e., reasoning] part." "If you admit the sweetened muse in lyrics and epics," says Socrates, "pleasure and pain will jointly be kings in your city instead of law."

To rub salt in the wounds of all who love literature, Socrates elsewhere in the *Republic* makes the point that poets prosper most completely under tyrants. This is so, he suggests, because tyrants are individuals who are most in touch with their extreme emotions, the "terrible, savage, and lawless form of desires" that exist in all people.

What seems most striking about this argument is the stark opposition Socrates makes between law, reason, and justice, on one hand, and literature, emotion, and tyranny, on the other. Your task in this essay is to engage with Socrates' argument. None of us will dispute the idea that literature arouses passion. Effusive critics praise even banal works by saying, "I laughed, I cried!" But must the emotional nature of the literary response disqualify it from the service of justice? Can empathy, laughter, or even erotic arousal never be ethically significant?

Write an essay in which you a) discuss how the different authors elicit emotional responses from their readers, and b) evaluate the ethical import of those emotional responses. Does Socrates have a point in regards to any of the works you have prepared? Or is his argument simply out of touch?

In framing your essay, you must deal with works from at least two genres and discuss in specific detail at least one work from each of the three periods—pre-1800 British, post-1800 British, and American.

