

Sample First Year Comprehensive/Qualifying Exam

Part I – Passport Essay (72 hours)

The Passport Essay is the take-home portion of the exam. You will have 72 hours from the time you receive the exam to complete it. At that point, you will return the passport exam to the Exam Proctor when you sit for second half: Parts II, III, and IV below. Note, only after you have completed the passport essay will you be allowed to take the second part of the exam. Choose one prompt from each section and write a 1500 word essay for each prompt. Each essay should engage at least 3 works from the MA reading list. Each essay should choose a representative selection of texts from an historical span of at least 200 years. In crafting your response, you will want to compare literary texts, putting key themes and concepts in conversation with each other while staying mindful of national, periodic, and generic distinctions between authors and texts. A strong essay will demonstrate your capacity for synthetic thinking by drawing upon a variety of readings and engaging those readings critically. The focus of your interpretations and argument must be on the primary sources from the MA reading list. You can draw on secondary sources if you wish, but they should only be used as a way to illuminate your analysis and discussion of the primary sources.

Section A (choose one)

A1. “One of the surest of tests is the way in which a poet borrows. Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different.”

T.S. Eliot, “Philip Massinger,” *The Sacred Wood*.

Write an essay about imitation, theft, and/or defacing. You may also consider addressing the questions of testing, relative value, or originality raised in the quotation. Note that your response is to the quotation and it is not necessary to read its source. However, do not forget to take account of national, periodic and generic distinctions as you proceed.

A2. “Culture... seeks to do away with classes; to make the best that has been thought and known in the world

current everywhere; to make all men live in an atmosphere of sweetness and light.”

Matthew Arnold, “Sweetness and Light,” *Culture and Anarchy*.

Write an essay that engages with Arnold’s claim that the purpose of culture (and therefore by association

literature) is to universalize and promote “the best that has been thought and known” and to deliver “an atmosphere of sweetness and light.” Do not forget to take account of national, periodic and generic distinctions as you proceed.

Section B (choose one)

B1. Issues of narrative most often focus on how the story, either in prose or verse, unfolds and makes meaning.

What is less attended to is how narrative constructs a reader, either an explicit or implied audience to whom the story is addressed. Analyze the ways those texts construct a narratee and what is at stake for the work’s meaning that a particular reader is imagined (and/or required).

B2. Discuss the differences between Petrarchan, Shakespearean, and Spenserian sonnet types and what is at stake in those differences with respect to the poem’s form and meaning. In addition, discuss examples from poets after 1700 who continue to work with sonnet types.

Parts II, III, and IV are taken after completion of the Passport Essay and are taken as a proctored exam on campus.

Part II – Close Reading and Analysis (90 min)

Read the following poem carefully and thoughtfully, and then write 1000-1500 words of detailed explication and analysis. Be aware that this poem is not one of those included in the MA reading list. This portion of the exam is designed to examine skills in close reading and the analysis of content and form in a single selected poem. Therefore the focus of your response is the poem itself and not identification or historical contextualization.

The Snow Storm

Announced by all the trumpets of the sky
Arrives the snow, and, driving o'er the fields,
Seems nowhere to alight: the whited air
Hides hills and woods, the river and the heaven,
And veils the farm-house at the garden's end.
The steed and traveller stopped, the courier's feet
Delayed, all friends shut out, the housemates sit
Around the radiant fireplace, enclosed
In a tumultuous privacy of storm.
Come, see the north wind's masonry.
Out of an unseen quarry evermore

Furnished with tile, the fierce artificer
Curves his white bastions with projected roof
Round every windward stake, or tree, or door.
Speeding, the myriad-handed, his wild work
So fanciful, so savage, naught cares he
For number or proportion. Mockingly
On coop or kennel he hangs Parian wreaths;
A swan-like form invests the hidden thorn;
Fills up the farmer's lane from wall to wall,
Maugre the farmer's sighs, and at the gate
A tapering turret overtops the work.
And when his hours are numbered, and the world
Is all his own, retiring, as he were not,
Leaves, when the sun appears, astonished Art
To mimic in slow structures, stone by stone
Built in an age, the mad wind's night-work,
The frolic architecture of the snow.

Part III – Definitions (60 min)

Select three terms from the list below and provide a definition as well as an example or instance of use or application. In citing your example, provide a brief (2-3 paragraphs) explanation as to how the example best represents the term or concept or how the term or concept can be applied to the example. This portion of the exam is designed to demonstrate your knowledge of the key terms and concepts (historical, formal, theoretical, and generic) of literary analysis. [A list of terms for you to study will be provided to you during the Fall semester.]

- A. Bildungsroman
- B. Free Verse
- C. Gothic
- D. Georgic
- E. Pastoral
- F. Pathetic Fallacy
- G. Picaresque
- H. Postmodern
- I. Synecdoche

Part IV – Identifications (90 min)

Select 4--and only 4--passages from the list below and assign an author, title, and approximate date. Then, in 250-500 words, offer a brief but focused analysis of style and content for each selected passage, indicating those features which are characteristic of the writer and period to which you have assigned it. This portion of the exam is designed to examine your skills in identifying a range of historical, stylistic, and generic markers. Note that all the passages are from works included on the MA reading list. [As a note of clarification, this is sample exam; obviously, the passages in any given year's exam will be from that year's MA reading list] Examples of passages are as follows:

A. Unimproved and wild as this district now seems to your eyes, what was it when I first entered the hills! I left my party, the morning of my arrival, back near the farms of the Cherry Valley, and, following a deer-path, rode to the summit of the mountain, that I have since called Mount Vision; for the sight that there met my eyes seemed to me as the deceptions of a dream. The fire had run over the pinnacle, and, in a great measure, laid open the view. The leaves were fallen, and I mounted a tree, and sat for an hour looking on the silent wilderness. Not an opening was to be seen in the boundless forest, except where the lake lay, like a mirror. The water was covered by myriads of the wild-fowl that migrate with the changes in the season; and, while in my situation on the branch of the beech, I saw a bear, with her cubs, descend to the shore to drink. I had met many deer, gliding through the woods, in my journey; but not the vestige of a man could I trace, during my progress, nor from my elevated observatory.

B. In tholde dayes of the Kyng Arthour,
Of which that Britons speken greet honour
All was this land fulfild of Fayerye.
The elf-queene, with hir joly compaignye,
Daunced ful ofte in many a grene mede;
This was the olde opinion, as I rede.
I speke of manye hundred yeres ago;
But now kan no man se none elves mo,
For now the grete charitee and prayers
Of lymytours, and othere hooly freres,
That serchen every lond and every streem
As thikke as motes in the sonne-beem,
Blessynge halles, chambres, kichenes, boures,
Citees, burghes, castels, hye toures,
Thropes, bernes, shipnes, dayeryes,
This maketh that ther been no Fayeryes.

C. It was very late and everyone had left the cafe except an old man who sat in the shadow the leaves of the tree made against the electric light. In the day time the street was dusty, but at night the dew settled the dust and the old man liked to sit late because he was deaf and now at night it was quiet and he felt the difference. The two waiters inside the cafe knew that the old man was a little drunk, and while he was a good client they knew that if he became too drunk he would leave without paying, so they kept watch on him.

"Last week he tried to commit suicide," one waiter said.

"Why?"

"He was in despair."

"What about?"

"Nothing."

"How do you know it was nothing?"

"He has plenty of money."

D. This fellow's of exceeding honesty,
And knows all qualities, with a learned spirit,
Of human dealings...Haply, for I am black
And have not those soft parts of conversation
That chamberers have, or for I am declined
Into the vale of years,—yet that's not much—
She's gone. I am abused; and my relief
Must be to loathe her. O curse of marriage,
That we can call these delicate creatures ours,
And not their appetites! I had rather be a toad,
And live upon the vapour of a dungeon,
Than keep a corner in the thing I love
For others' uses...

E. "Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my re-memory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the picture of it-stays, and not just in my re-memory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened...Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It's never going away. Even if the whole farm-every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there-you who never was there-if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you. So, Denver, you can't never go there. Never. Because even though it's all over—over and done with—it's going to always be there waiting for you."

F. This mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.
What matter where, if I be still the same,
And what I should be, all but less than he
Whom thunder hath made great? Here at least
We shall be free; th' Almighty had not built
Here for his envy, will not drive us hence;

Here we may reign secure; and, in my choice,
To reign is worth ambition, though in Hell:
Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.