

A Sampling of Recent MA Exam Questions

During the MA Exam, you will be asked to select one from among two to three questions in each field. You are allowed a total of 2 hours—roughly 30 minutes for deliberation and 1.5 hours for writing—for each of the four fields you select.

Please note that some of the sample questions below might seem a bit more specific than is typical on a “general knowledge” exam because they are keyed to graduate seminars taught during the academic year. The students taking the exam had enrolled in these seminars.

Middle English

1. What constitutes a strong woman in Middle English literature? Use at least three different authors when constructing your discussion, with a couple of contrasting examples by one or two of the authors.
2. Discuss the relationships of audience to author in medieval literature. Several of the most intricately crafted poems of British literature come from the 14th century (e.g., Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* and *Pearl* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* from the Cotton manuscript), with marginal markers of various kinds to assist individual readers, all of which suggests that the writers are consciously concerned with the potentialities of a new, literate and well educated audience for vernacular literature. On the other hand, the literature is highly concerned with auralty and subtle voicing. One approach to these issues might be to begin your discussion with ideas of reading as a performative craft, whether the reading occurs primarily through the eyes or through the ears, with intellect and memory as the essential staging areas.
3. Issues of ethics in medieval literature usually focus on matters of the will—choice, motive, and intention. Using the N-Town play “*The Woman Taken in Adultery*” as your starting point, discuss the medieval aptitude for moral literature, with a refined sense of interface between the high-minded and the comic.

English Renaissance

1. Select three plays from the reading list you have studied. Consider what you know more generally about Renaissance practices surrounding death and Renaissance literary depictions of death. How does your understanding of death in Renaissance society, culture, and/or literature help you to interpret the significance of death in each of these three plays? Please remember that the question focuses on interpretation. In other words, be sure to explain precisely why or how the scenes of death or references to death matter in your understanding of these three plays.
2. Select, from the list you studied, three works (plays, poems or prose) that depict women who are verbally powerful (for instance, as writers, speech-makers, persuaders, cursers, gossipers). Describe with precision the nature of their verbal power and then explain how each of these works relies, presumably in quite different ways, on the figure of the verbally powerful woman. This too is a question that focuses on interpretation. For example, how does each author use the

verbally powerful woman to—and these are just "for instances" and not meant to be prescriptive or to set limitations—establish their work's tragic or comic paradigms; examine the distinction between and overlapping of public and private spheres; sort through acceptable and/or effective versions of rhetoric, style, or authorship; mark or navigate through competing Renaissance authority relations?

3. Select three sonnets (representing work by at least two authors) from the list you studied. How does each sonnet convey meaning by relying on the audience's knowledge of the formal and thematic traits associated with the English or Italian sonnet? Again, this is a questions that focuses on interpretation . You will need to produce three careful close readings that explain precisely how each poem is trying to engage its audience.

Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Literature

1. An overarching concern of much of eighteenth-century literature is the problem of how to read the body. *The Country Wife* is about a notorious rake whose challenge is to feign impotence to other men while making women understand that he is still very much – indeed, now more than ever—open for business. Swift's *Lady's Dressing Room* seeks to “expose” the armory of powders, paints, and pomades that women use to dissimulate the “reality” of their bodies. Likewise, *Tristram Shandy* evinces an obsession with gesture and posture—the doffing of a hat, the flourish of a walking stick, the angle of the orating body. *Persuasion* thematizes the challenges of discerning thoughts and feelings on the surfaces of the body when social circumstances render point-blank verbal declarations either improper or impossible.

What forms does the eighteenth century's investment in body-reading take, what significances does it seem to have (what “other” problems might it seem to stand for?), and how does it change over time or across different texts? Your discussion may focus on the works named above, or you may choose other examples; either way, your answer should engage with at least two different genres.

2. The eighteenth-century novel has traditionally been studied separately from drama or poetry. Years' worth of syllabi and conference-panel topics have cemented this division. As a result, the “uniqueness” of the Novel has perhaps been overemphasized: the Novel is “modern,” is “realistic,” is interested in “subjectivity,” in a way that other literature from the period is “not.” What would be the effects, contrastingly, of considering the eighteenth-century novel in the context of Augustan satire and/or Restoration drama? What insights into *Pamela*, *Tom Jones*, or *Tristram Shandy*, for example, might be gained by discussing them in light of the stylistic, thematic, and epistemological concerns of poetry and the theatre? Frame your answer in relation to one to two novels and one to two non-novels.

British Romantic Writing

1. Literary-histories of romanticism tend to posit a shift, at the end of the eighteenth century, from “mimetic” to “expressive” models of poetry: the aim of literature was no longer to offer a “reflection” of the external world, but rather to provide a “revelation of personality.” In terms of genre, satire gave way to lyric; in terms of epistemological paradigms, empiricism gave way to

psychology. But of course, the romantic poets are also famous for their interest in nature, and the power of many of their poems hinges upon a striking use of visual detail (think of Wordsworth's description of daffodils, Shelley's meditation on Mont Blanc, Keats' ode to Autumn). How does romantic poetry bridge both inner and outer, mind and matter? How did the romantics reconcile their particularized attention to the natural world with their commitment to exploring memory, emotion, and the unconscious? Refer to several texts in your response.

2. Many definitions of romanticism highlight the romantics' intense privileging of the individual and individualism – their interest in how the poet becomes a poet (Wordsworth's *Prelude*); their focus on the passionate rebel-hero, pitted against a small-minded and restrictive society from which he chooses to exile himself (Byron's *Childe Harold*). Yet it is well known that these authors often collaborated, and consciously cultivated literary coteries: *The Prelude* was originally intended as part of a longer, epic poem called *The Recluse*, which Wordsworth and Coleridge planned to write together; according to Wordsworth, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* was inspired by a conversation the two poets had about a book Wordsworth was reading; and according to Shelley, it was with Shelley's support and encouragement that Byron wrote *Don Juan*. Certainly, even without reference to particular biographical details, we can find in these authors' poetry a multiplicity of overlapping concerns, motifs, settings, and characters. In a consideration of several texts, discuss the interaction of solitariness and sociability in romantic literature. In what ways do you see the two values in conflict? In what ways might they be seen to blend?

Victorian Literature

1. Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* and Thomas Carlyle's *Past and Present* both fault Victorians for idolizing the value of personal liberty. In your essay, discuss the problems Arnold and Carlyle perceive within a society of increasing democratization, industrialization, and capitalism. What remedies do they propose?

2. Drawing on at least three different authors from your reading list, discuss how the novels/poems composed by these writers offer a critique of Victorian gender norms.

3. John Stuart Mill once famously described the Victorian period as an "age of transition." In your essay, discuss how either George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss* or *Middlemarch* depict a society grappling with transition.

Nineteenth-Century American Literature

1. How does Emerson's notion of self-reliance reflect a specific social orientation that is not easily applied to all people living in 19th-century America? Use at least three texts on your list to suggest the limitations of his universal claims.

2. Compare Bartleby's infamous "I would prefer not to" to the type of resistance advocated by Thoreau in "Civil Disobedience." How do these differing approaches conceptualize human freedom, individuality and social change among other major 19th-century concerns? Supplement

your response with at least one other text to argue for how American writers of this era understood the limits and possibilities of resistance.

3. W. E. DuBois famously said that the problem of the 20th century would be the problem of the color line, but in many nineteenth-century works of literature the color line shows itself already to be an issue. Choose two works from early in the century and two from late and discuss the ways in which they reflect, interrogate, or critique the problem of race. Use specific examples from the works in developing your answer.

4. Emerson has often been cited as the dominant influence on American writers at mid-century. Specify how Emerson may have influenced three writers from the following list: Melville, Hawthorne, Poe, Thoreau, Dickenson, Whitman, Fuller, Stowe. Remember, a given writer might manifest Emerson's influence by resisting or even rejecting it. Be as precise as possible.

Modern American Literature

1. Why, after nearly 100 years, does *The Wasteland* continue to play such a prominent role in the stories we tell about twentieth-century American poetry? Describe the relationship of three different poets (i.e., Williams, Crane, Lowell, Bishop, Oppen, etc.) to Eliot's paradigm-shifting poem.

2. People often speak of the "meta-fictional" nature of post-modern fiction writing, but the impulse is in many ways as old as the impulse to create fictions; think of Cervantes. Describe the ways in which three modern American novels (i.e., Faulkner, James, Hurston, Cather, Wharton, etc.) are themselves about novel-making or embody the impulse of novel-making in the formal procedures

Modern British Literature

1. One of the common claims about modern and postmodern fiction is that it is intensely self-reflexive—that it is writing about the subject of writing. In some cases, this takes the form of foregrounding the process by which the text we read is constructed—whether as a written text or an act of storytelling. Often, how the story is told (or written) becomes more important than what the story tells. Put another way, one could argue that many works of twentieth century British fiction are centrally concerned with the question of fiction-making, and these texts often focus on the permeable boundaries between the fictional and the real. Looking closely at three to four novels from the period, discuss their treatment of the process of writing, storytelling, or fiction-making.

2. It has often been argued that World War I effected a decisive shift in modern consciousness, necessitating new literary forms to meet a radically changed understanding of the world. More recently, however, critics have suggested that the "the rupture of 1914-18 was much less complete than previous scholars have suggested." Jay Winter, for example, has argued that "The overlap of languages and approaches between the old and the new, the 'traditional' and the 'modern,' the conservative and the iconoclastic, was apparent both during and after the war. The

ongoing dialogue and exchange among artists and their public, between those who self-consciously returned to nineteenth-century forms and themes and those who sought to supersede them, makes the history of modernism more complicated than a simple, linear divide between 'old' and 'new' might suggest." Looking at four twentieth-century works from your list, discuss the extent to which you see the Great War as effecting a decisive break in aesthetic practice. How do you understand the history of modernism in terms of the "old" and the "new"?