PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

COMMON EXAM IN ENGLISH

May 5, 2022

**SAMPLE EXAM**

General Instructions

Over the two parts of the exam, you must write about **at least five** of the Common Works, and **at least two of books 1-5** and **two of books 6-11**. You may have all of the Common Works with you at the exam, including the eleventh work your class selected, and a work of your own choice if you chose this option for Part II.

1. Chaucer 6. Dickinson

2. Shakespeare 7. Soyinka

3. Milton 8. Morrison

4. Austen 9. Ghosh

5. Blake 10. Torres

11. Butler

**PART I (three hours) 9am-12pm**

Write three short essays (about 500-750 words), on three different passages chosen from the following ten. One should be a commentary, one should be conversation, and the third is a wild card—another commentary, another conversation, or an imitation. Plan to spend forty minutes on each of your answers (reserving sixty minutes of the three allotted hours for revisions).

**Close reading/Commentary**. Write a focused analysis of the ideas and style of each passage. You should read the passage closely, and also situate it in the work as a whole, in relation to the work’s ideas, its plot or argument, and its language. You may (and should!) quote from elsewhere in the book to support your claims.

**Conversation**. Below the ten passages, you will see four additional “intertexts.” Your essay should put one of the intertexts in conversation with one of the passages from the Common Works. They might treat a shared question in different ways; one might develop or dispute an idea in the other; they might have intriguing affinities of style, or make a pointed contrast. Your essay should explore their relation, what each lets you see about the other that you might not otherwise have seen. Once again you may (and should!) quote from elsewhere in the Common Work in question to support your claims.

**Imitation**. Continue the passage in its own style, writing (at least) five more lines of poetry or ten more sentences of prose. The point is not to reproduce what actually follows in the original, but to take the passage in a new and revealing direction, introducing a telling image, a surprising swerve of dialogue, a detour in the plot. Follow your imitation with a prose commentary in your own voice explaining what you did: why it sounds like the original (what specific stylistic devices you used), and what your innovation would mean to an interpretation of the book.

PASSAGES

1. Experience, though no authority

Were in this world, were good enough for me,

To speak of woe that is in all marriage;

For, masters, since I was twelve years of age,

Thanks be to God Who is for aye alive,

Of husbands at church door have I had five;

For men so many times have wedded me;

And all were worthy men in their degree.

But someone told me not so long ago

That since Our Lord, save once, would never go

To wedding (that at Cana in Galilee),

Thus, by this same example, showed He me

I never should have married more than once.

(Geoffrey Chaucer, “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue,” 1-13)

2. Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,  
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,  
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,  
Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you  
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en  
Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp;  
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,  
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,  
And show the heavens more just.

(William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 3.4.28-36)

3. Farewel happy Fields

Where Joy for ever dwells: Hail horrours, hail

Infernal world, and thou profoundest Hell

Receive thy new Possessor: One who brings

A mind not to be chang’d by Place or Time.

The mind is its own place, and in it self

Can make a Heav’n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n.

What matter where, if I be still the same,

And what I should be, all but less then he

Whom Thunder hath made greater? Here at least

We shall be free; th’ Almighty hath not built

Here for his envy, will not drive us hence:

Here we may reign secure, and in my choyce

To reign is worth ambition though in Hell:

Better to reign in Hell, then serve in Heav'n.

(John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, I. 249-63)

4. “I cannot make speeches, Emma,” he soon resumed; and in a tone of such sincere,

decided, intelligible tenderness as was tolerably convincing. "If I loved you less, I might be able to talk about it more. But you know what I am. You hear nothing but truth from me. I have blamed you, and lectured you, and you have borne it as no other woman in England would have borne it. Bear with the truths I would tell you now, dearest Emma, as well as you have borne with them. The manner, perhaps, may have as little to recommend them. God knows, I have been a very indifferent lover. But you understand me. Yes, you see, you understand my feelings and will return them if you can. At present, I ask only to hear, once to hear your voice.”   
  
(Jane Austen, *Emma*, p. TK)

5. The Clod and the Pebble

‘Love seeketh not itself to please,  
   Nor for itself hath any care,  
But for another gives its ease,  
   And builds a heaven in hell’s despair.’

So sung a little clod of clay,  
   Trodden with the cattle’s feet,  
But a pebble of the brook  
   Warbled out these metres meet:

‘Love seeketh only Self to please,  
   To bind another to its delight,  
Joys in another’s loss of ease,  
   And builds a hell in heaven’s despite.’

(William Blake, *Songs of Innocence and Experience)*

# 6. I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -

The Stillness in the Room

Was like the Stillness in the Air -

Between the Heaves of Storm -

The Eyes around - had wrung them dry -

And Breaths were gathering firm

For that last Onset - when the King

Be witnessed - in the Room -

I willed my Keepsakes - Signed away

What portion of me be

Assignable - and then it was

There interposed a Fly -

With Blue - uncertain - stumbling Buzz -

Between the light - and me -

And then the Windows failed - and then

I could not see to see -

(Emily Dickinson, #591)

7. **Praise-Singer:** I say you are that man who  
Chanced upon the calabash of honour  
You thought it was palm wine and  
Drained its contents to the final drop.

**Elesin:** Life has an end. A life that will outlive  
Fame and friendship begs another name.  
What elder takes his tongue to his plate,  
Licks it clean of every crumb? He will encounter  
Silence when he calls on children to fulfill  
The smallest errand! Life is honour.  
It ends when honour ends.  
  
(Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King’s Horseman*, p. TK)

8. The birdlike gestures are worn away to a mere picking and plucking her way

between the tire rims and the sunflowers, between Coke bottles and milkweed, among all the waste and beauty of the world—which is what she herself was. All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us.

(Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, p. TK)

9. In accounts of the Anthropocene, and of the present climate crisis, capitalism is very

often the pivot on which the narrative turns. I have no quarrel with this: as I see it, Naomi Klein and others are right to identify capitalism as one of the principal drivers of climate change. However, I believe that this narrative often overlooks an aspect of the Anthropocene that is of equal importance: empire and imperialism. While capitalism and empire are certainly dual aspects of a single reality, the relationship between them is not, and has never been, a simple one: in relation to global warming, I think it is demonstrably the case that the imperatives of capital and empire have often pushed in different directions, sometimes producing counter- intuitive results.

(Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, p. 87)

10. When we were brothers, when we were all three together, we made a woman. We

stacked up on one another's shoulders and wrapped ourselves in Ma's long winter coat. Manny was the bottom, the legs, and Joel was the stomach, and I was the lightest, so I was the woman's head. We used a ladder to keep from tipping over, but Manny's knees buckled under our weight, so we had to lie down on the ground and do it that way; we were a fallen woman who could not get back up, a helpless woman, flat on her back.

When we were brothers, we were Musketeers.

“Three for all! And free for all!” we shouted and stabbed at each other with forks.

(Justin Torres, *We the Animals*, p. 43)

INTERTEXTS

1. …[S]everal things dove-tailed in my mind, and at once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously — I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason — Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge. This pursued through volumes would perhaps take us no further than this, that with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration. (Keats, Letters, 1817)

2. The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them. Most important, the grand narratives of emancipation and enlightenment mobilized people in the colonial world to rise up and throw off imperial subjection; in the process, many Europeans and Americans were also stirred by these stories and their protagonists, and they too fought for new narratives of equality and human community.  (Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 1993)

3. The author—or what I have called the “author-function”—is undoubtedly only one of the possible specifications of the subject and, considering past historical transformations, it appears that the form, the complexity, and even the existence of this function are far from immutable. We can easily imagine a culture where discourse would circulate without any need for an author. Discourses, whatever their status, form, or value, and regardless of our manner of handling them, would unfold in a pervasive anonymity. No longer the tiresome repetitions:

“Who is the real author?'

“Have we proof of his authenticity and originality?”

“What has he revealed of his most profound self in his language?”

New questions will be heard:

“What are the modes of existence of this discourse?”

“Where does it come from; how is it circulated; who controls it?”

“What placements are determined for possible subjects?”

“Who can fulfill these diverse functions of the subject?”

Behind all these questions we would hear little more than the murmur of indifference:

“What matter who’s speaking?” (Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?” 1969)

4. Solitude is impracticable, and society fatal. We must keep our head in the one and our hands in the other. The conditions are met, if we keep our independence, yet do not lose our sympathy. These wonderful horses need to be driven by fine hands. We require such a solitude as shall hold us to its revelations when we are in the street and in palaces; for most men are cowed in society, and say good things to you in private, but will not stand to them in public. But let us not be the victims of words. Society and solitude are deceptive names. It is not the circumstance of seeing more or fewer people, but the readiness of sympathy, that imports; and a sound mind will derive its principles from insight, with ever a purer ascent to the sufficient and absolute right, and will accept society as the natural element in which they are to be applied. (Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Society and Solitude,” 1870)

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General Instructions

Over the two parts of the exam, you must write about **at least five** of the Common Works, and at least two of books 1-5 and two of books 6-11. **Please begin by circling the works you wrote about in Part 1 this morning, and circle the works you write about this afternoon as you go.**

1. Chaucer 6. Dickinson

2. Shakespeare 7. Soyinka

3. Milton 8. Morrison

4. Austen 9. Ghosh

5. Blake 10. Torres

11. Butler

PART II (two hours) 1:30pm-3:30pm

Choose ***one of the two*** essay questions below. Making reference to ***at least two*** works from the Common Works not included in your answers in Part I, please write one longer essay (about 1250-1500 words). Plan to spend about ninety minutes on your answer (reserving thirty minutes for revisions).

**1.**Nominate **one work** (book, film, poem, play, etc.) for inclusion in a future version of the Common Works. You will have to introduce the work, its maker(s), and its context, but this is primarily an exercise in interpretation as advocacy. Making reference **to at least two** of the current Common Works, explain how your work would develop ideas or problems represented in the list, how it might fill a gap, or both. What would you want your successors, future English concentrators, to learn from reading it? Why is it good to think about and think with?

**2.**Compose a critical conversation between **at least** **two** Common Works you did not address in Part I, about something they share that you think is important: it could be a problem they both address; a particular trope or motif that figures in both; a relation to genre or form; or any other critical question where you see them converge (in agreement, or disagreement). Your challenge is to imagine the conversation between two very different voices—not to write the dialogue, but to be the critic who overhears them, and brings to your own reader a careful analysis of the critical issues at stake. This essay question encourages you to adapt insights from seminars, your research, and other scholarly conversations that are important to you. When you analyze these two texts using these skills or through these lenses, what do you learn?   