

Examples of Essay Questions

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Bad

Discuss the role of women in Shakespeare's tragedies.

Review the critical theories that explain Hamlet's behavior in Acts I – III of *Hamlet*.

Discuss the importance of slavery for Melville and Stowe. How is it different for Thoreau and Douglass?

Explicate a short lyric (The Lake, Preface, or To Helen) and discuss Poe's creation of the persona of the poet.

Discuss several permanent contributions Benjamin Franklin has made to American life, ranging from the practical to the ideological.

Discuss the important themes in the poetry of Phillis Wheatley.

Good

Explain how one woman character from *King Lear* and *Hamlet* sets the "tragic arc" of each play.

Evaluate three of the critical justifications of Hamlet's madness: which theory do you find most convincing and why?

Is it more effective to present the abolitionist argument in fiction (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Benito Cereno*) or in essays (*Slavery in Massachusetts*, *The Meaning of the Fourth of July for the Negro*)?

What knowledge of ancient history does the persona in Poe's lyric "To Helen" display, and why?

How does Benjamin Franklin introduce his several achievements in civic and scientific life in the *Autobiography*? What rhetorical strategies are at work in these examples of his writing?

What imagery does Phillis Wheatley use to discuss slavery that is not *specifically* enslavement or bondage? What purpose does she have in using this kind of poetic camouflage?

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Final exam, English 225, American Literature I

Take-home essay

For this essay, please look at the passage. It is by one of the American authors we have read since the midterm exam. This passage is not a work that we read as a class, and it is not in your Norton anthology, or other literature anthologies. (It is also not available on the internet—I checked thoroughly.)

Who wrote this passage and how can you tell? That answer will constitute your essay (about 3-4 pages, typed and double-spaced). Please identify who the writer is and what style details (not content) **specifically** tipped you off. You are basically saying in this essay, “I can tell that this is written by X, because I know X’s style well enough to judge.”

While it will be important to identify this writer correctly, **it will be far more important to your grade on this exam to make a strong and effective argument about why.** I can even imagine giving an A to someone who guesses the identity incorrectly but who can make an effective argument about a “false” candidate. I can also imagine giving a poor grade to someone who can guess the identity of the writer, but who can’t offer me any persuasive reasons why it must be this writer. So please spend a great deal of time on justifying your decision.

Here is the passage:

March 19, 1863

Dear Nat,

Since I left I was down in the Army of the Potomac in the front a good part of the winter, commencing the time of the battle of Fredericksburg—have seen *war-life*, the real article—folded myself in a blanket, lying down in the mud with composure—relished salt pork and hardtack—have been on the battlefield among the wounded, the faint and the bleeding, to give them nourishment—have gone over with a flag of truce the next day to help direct the burial of the dead—have struck up a tremendous friendship with a young Mississippi captain (about 19) that we took prisoner badly wounded... These Hospitals, so different from all others—these thousands, and tens and twenties of thousands of American young men, badly wounded, all sorts of wounds, operated on, pallid with diarrhea, languishing, dying with fever, pneumonia, etc., open a new world somehow to me, giving closer insights, new things, exploring deeper mines, than any yet, showing our humanity (I sometimes put myself in my fancy in the cot, with typhoid, or under the knife), tried by terrible, fearfulest tests, probed deepest, the living soul’s, the body’s tragedies, bursting the petty bonds of art. To these, what are your dramas and poems, even the oldest and the fearfulest? Not old Greek mighty ones, where man contends with fate (and always yields)—not Virgil showing Dante on and on among the agonized and damned, approach what I see here and take part in. For here I see, not at intervals, but quite always, how certain man, our American man—how he holds himself cool and unquestioned master above all pains and bloody mutilations. It is immense, the best thing of all—nourishes me of all men. This then, what frightened us all so long. Why, it is put to flight with ignominy—a mere stuffed scarecrow of the fields. Oh death, where is thy sting? Oh grave, where is thy victory?