

First Midterm Exam Questions
Engl 56A, Spring 2009

Your first midterm examination will consist of an essay and, in addition, several passages from the texts we have read so far in the course, which you will need to identify by title and author and briefly discuss. Your essay will be written on one of the following topics – though you will not find out which one until the exam itself. The idea, obviously, is to get you to prepare all of these subjects as thoroughly as possible, even though you'll only end up writing on one of them. Writing an in-class essay on literature is much like writing any other essay on literature, with the exception that you are not expected to be able to quote passages from the texts (and, while it is possible to memorize particularly important passages for use on the exam, and you are encouraged to do so if you wish, such a display of recall will not be graded higher than a detailed description of the same passage). The main features of a successful essay include:

- A thesis. The topics listed below are probably too general to be covered in such a short essay, so you need to focus your approach on a specific aspect of that topic, and to have a clear point that you wish to make about that aspect.
- Arguments to support that thesis. Your thesis is an assertion, and to support it you need to develop an argument that has your interpretations of the texts as the premises and the thesis as the eventual conclusion.
- References to the texts. Whether you quote or simply offered detailed descriptions, you need to ground the arguments you construct, in order to convince the reader of the point you are trying to make, in specific passages, scenes, imagery, or other elements of the works under discussion.
- Analysis to explain those references. Your reading of a text may be different from that of someone else, so just identifying the passages or elements on which you base that reading may not be enough to persuade your reader. Instead, make sure you analyze that passage, explaining exactly why you think your reading of it is clear and accurate.

In addition, of course, a successful thesis is well written and clear, and contains a degree of originality or inventiveness; those qualities—clarity and originality—are just as important in an in-class essay as in any other sort. Keeping that in mind, you should come to the exam (with at least one 8-1/2" x 11" bluebook) prepared to write on one of the following:

1. Women: Issues of the role, status, and qualities of women recur frequently in medieval literature. Contrast the way women function or are viewed in three of the following: *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* or *The Nun's Priest's Tale*; *Gawain*; and *Lanval* or *The Second Play of the Shepherds*.
2. Nature and Society: One of the frequent themes in the works we have read has to do with nature and society – sometimes in opposition to each other, sometimes as expressions of each other. Discuss the ways in which nature and society are presented in three of the following works: *Beowulf* or *The Wanderer*; *Gawain*; and *The Second Play of the Shepherds* or *The Miller's Tale*.
3. Religion: The Middle Ages saw the arrival of Christianity in Britain and its impact on both literature and popular beliefs. Discuss the way religion is presented, and how it affects the overall theme of the works, in three of the following: *The Dream of the Rood* or *Beowulf*; *Gawain*; and *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* or *The Second Play of the Shepherds*.