**Unit MX: About the Midterm Exam**

**The exam**

The midterm consists of two parts, a "short answer" section where you explain the thematic significance of passages from the works we've read thus far, and an essay section where you explain thematic connections between the different writers and works we've read.

**1) Short answers:**  
In this portion of the exam, you will be given twelve passages from the works we've covered thus far, Gilgamesh, The Odyssey, Oedipus the King, Medea, *Lysistrata*, and *The Aeneid*: you will write a brief paragraph (of 2-4 sentences) explaining the thematic significance of eight of the twelve passages.

These passages will all be of key significance in each work. **Note** that short answers are **not simple "identification."** To explain the thematic significance of a passage, you will of course need to say which work it is taken from, but each short answer must also **explain how the passage is important in conveying the work's larger themes or "messages."** In other words, your task is to go beyond simply identifying the passages, taking care to explain how the passages are important not on the level of plot, or "what happens in the story," but in terms of the work's larger themes, or the work's essential "meaning" or significance as a whole. To ensure that you understand the term "thematic significance," recalling the definition of "theme" I gave on the “elements of fiction” page in Unit 2 will be helpful.

**Definition of *theme*:** In the simplest, broadest terms, one quality that differentiates works of “literature” from other written texts (especially those intended primarily to entertain) is that literary works often present a **theme**, or “message” that applies beyond the level of plot with continuing relevance for an audience beyond the world presented in the text. A literary work’s theme makes some commentary upon or offers insight into the human condition. Think of a fable, for instance, where the universal theme is stated directly as the “moral of the story.” In the famous fable about the tortoise and the hare, the message is that “slow and steady wins the race,” or more precisely, focused, extended perseverance leads to a better outcome than dashing around in erratic bursts of frenzied high-speed activity. ***The theme isn't a matter limited to the two characters in the story, or even turtles and rabbits generally: the fable's theme pertains to you and me and all of humanity.***

Some works’ themes are relatively limited in scope: among other themes, for instance, Charles Dickens’s novel *Bleak House* points out the destructive nature of a legal system more intent on perpetuating itself as a system than providing justice. On the other hand, the commentary on the destructive nature of guilt in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* clearly applies to all human beings—we all experience powerful feelings of guilt at times. To an extent, literary works exploring the most universal themes have the longest staying power.

**A theme is more than one word! While in some other contexts “themes” might be stated as a single word, as we have defined the term in this class and as is most common in literary studies at the college level, a theme is a work’s “message,” and a message goes beyond just a single word. So it would not be good to say that a work’s theme is “revenge” or “mortality,” for instance. Instead you should say what the work *says* or *shows* about revenge or mortality: as in “*The Odyssey* shows that the gods will get vengeance when they are wronged by mortals,” or “*Gilgamesh* presents the theme that we all must accept our mortality.”**

**Important tip:** In your short answers on the exam, it may seem stylistically boring or awkward, but you would do well to use the phrase, "the passage is significant because" in each answer, or some similar phrase, and as much as possible you would do well to use the key word "theme" in each answer. This tip won't guarantee that you get full credit for each item, but saying "the passage is significant because" and mentioning specific themes as themes can help ensure that you do indeed focus on thematic significance instead of simply identifying passages or focusing only on matters of plot.

**Sample short answer, graded:**

**Identify and explain the thematic significance of the passage in 2-4 sentences.**

1. Because of my brother I am afraid of death, because of my brother I stray through the wilderness and cannot rest.

Answer a:  
This passage comes from Gilgamesh. Here Gilgamesh says he is afraid of death after his friend Enkidu dies.

This answer would get very little credit, only 2 points out of a possible 5, because it identifies the passage without explaining its thematic significance.

Answer b:  
This passage in Gilgamesh is significant because it demonstrates one of the poem’s most important central themes, the idea that human beings must all accept their mortality. After Enkidu dies, the fact of his mortality is driven home to Gilgamesh and it unsettles him—he even tries to find the secret to immortality by visiting Utanapishtim. What the poem teaches readers is that we all need to accept that we are mortal and make the most of our lives by enjoying all aspects of life every day.

This answer would get full credit, 5/5 pts. because it goes beyond identifying the passage and explains how the passage supports one of the poem's central themes, on the importance of accepting our mortality. Also note that the theme is not something limited to the poem itself, but something extending beyond the poem with a message of some relevance to all readers. Finally, it’s worth noting that this A+ answer is only three sentences in length. Make every sentence count, and don’t get bogged down in describing plot matters. Just state the *thematic significance* and move on.

*You should also see the three sample short answers in the “grades and grading criteria” portion of the syllabus—follow the “2000-4000 grading” link in the introductory unit on our schedule page at* [*www.chipspage.com*](http://www.chipspage.com)*.*

**2) The essay:**As with the short answers, you will have some choice in the essay, selecting one topic from three or so options. Each essay topic will ask you to make thematic connections between two or more of the different works or writers we've covered thus far. Of necessity, the essay topics will be fairly broad in nature, as some of the works we've read differ from the others radically in their themes and major concerns, so you should be thinking of different obvious connections you might draw between different sets of two, three or four of the following: Gilgamesh, The Odyssey, Oedipus the King, Medea, *Lysistrata*, and *The Aeneid*.

Essay structure is important. I will expect thoroughly well-developed introductions in your formal papers, but in exam essays you need only a brief **introduction that establishes which topic you are addressing and identifies the works you will cover**. Take care to avoid plot summary—simply retelling what happens in a work—instead, begin every body ¶ with a topic sentence stating what the main point of the ¶ is and then make sure plot references elaborate or illustrate that initial point directly. The conclusion may be brief in an exam essay, and it should reiterate the central analysis of the entire essay.

**Throughout body ¶’s give specific examples from the works. You may refer to your book, but realize that this test is not a term paper, so do not waste time finding quotes or the exact place of the reference. Rather, describe the example clearly so that when reading your essay, I will understand how it applies to and supports your point. Do NOT waste time thumbing through your book while you should be typing.**

**How to study for the exam:**Obviously, you should review notes from class and at least skim through the works we’ve read. Perhaps most importantly, seek out, reread, and study specific passages in each work that seem to focus most directly on the work’s central themes, or the angles we’ve covered in class. Make brief notes for how you might explain the thematic significance of each passage should it appear in the short answer segment of the exam. Reviewing key passages carefully will go a long way in preparing you for the essay as well.

I always found it helpful in studying for exams to distill all reading, lecture, and discussion notes into a very short document—two or three pages, e.g. You may put together one page of notes, front and back, to use in the exam. Even more than being helpful during the exam, the process of reducing all your other notes down into such a short document in itself can serve as excellent preparation for the test. Here, too, you don’t want to waste time thumbing through pages and pages of notes, but if you have just a couple of pages, you can refer to these notes quickly as needed with very little loss of time.

One last thing: *study!*