**About the Midterm Exam**

An exam—oh boy! 😊

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

**Time and timing:** My midterm exams in face-to-face classes usually take the full period of 75 minutes. I give you guys a little cushion and extend the time limit to 90 minutes. Ideally everyone would do the exam Tuesday, but for those of you who would rather knock it out Monday, I will open the exam (a D2L quiz) Monday, March 11th, at 7:00 p.m. If both days are significantly problematic for you, let me know.

**1) Short answers**  
You will have a selection of twelve passages from the writers and works we've covered thus far: Blake, Wollstonecraft, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Percy Shelley, Keats, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Robert Browning, and Charles Dickens.

Your task in this part of the exam will be to write a brief paragraph (of 2-4 sentences) explaining the thematic significance of **eight** of the twelve passages.

All passages will be of major significance to the works they’re taken from. **Note** that short answers are **not just "identification."** To explain the thematic significance, you will of course need to say which author and/or work it is taken from, but short answers must also **explain how the passage is important in conveying the work's larger themes or "messages."** Your task goes beyond simply identifying the passages and explaining what they mean in isolation, but in terms of the work's larger themes, or the work's essential "meaning" or significance overall. In thinking of "thematic significance," reviewing the definition of "theme" from the Elements of fiction page may 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.

**A theme is more than one word! While in other contexts “themes” might be stated as a single word, as we have defined the term in this class and as is common in literary studies, a theme is a work’s “message,” and a *message* goes beyond just a single word.**

**It would be “unfortunate” to say that a work’s theme is “art” or “redemption,” for instance. Instead, you should say what the work *says* or *shows* about art or redemption: as in**

**“Tennyson’s ‘Ulysses’ portrays the common Victorian theme that there is great value in *striving*, keeping active and working towards goals, even in old age.”**

**Or “One central theme of *Great Expectations* is the importance of learning to accept our faults and take responsibility for our bad behavior, as Pip learns to do. Acknowledging and trying to make amends for our mistakes as Pip does with Joe, Biddy, and Magwitch, for instance, is key to achieving redemption and maturation, a standard feature of the *bildungsroman* that Dickens’s novel exemplifies so perfectly.”**

**Important tip:** In your short answers, it may seem repetitive, but you would do well to use the phrase, "the passage is significant because" in each answer, and as much as possible you would do well to use the key word "theme" (as defined above) in each answer. This tip doesn’t guarantee full credit, but saying "the passage is significant because" and mentioning specific themes **as themes** can help ensure focus on thematic significance instead of simply identifying passages or focusing only on matters of plot.   
  
Also note the broadening of the applicability of the statement of the theme in the two samples above: noting that Tennyson’s was a “**common Victorian theme**” and that Dickens’s applies **not just to Pip but to *all of us***(implied pronouns “we” and “us,” direct iteration of “our”). The mention of *bildungsroman* suggests a thematic connection beyond just this one novel as well.

**Sample short answers, graded: see the three examples from the grades and grading criteria portion of our syllabus here:** <http://chipspage.com/WritingMatters/234000grades.html#SA>

**2) The essay**As with the short answers, you will have some choice in the essay, selecting one topic from three options, maybe four. 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. Obviously, essay topics will be broad in nature, as some of the works we've read differ from the others radically in theme and subject, so you should consider different obvious connections you might draw between different sets of two, three or even four of the writers. Given our weeks-long focus on Dickens, you can expect to see *Great Expectations* in all topic options, along with a mixture of Blake, Wollstonecraft, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Percy Shelley, Keats, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Tennyson, and Robert Browning. Typically you will need to write on at least three authors for each essay option.

Essay structure is important. While I expect thoroughly well-developed introductions in formal papers, exam essays 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 spend valuable 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 the texts while you should be typing!   
  
Hint: Presenting multiple examples in each body ¶ is a *huge factor* in successful essays.**

**3) How to study for the exam**Obviously, you should go back through the **overview pages at chipspage.com and the headnotes** in our text for each period and writer we’ve covered. Then reread the discussion questions for each unit and skim through the threaded discussions to help your recall the larger themes in each work—in discussions where I’ve chimed in, it’s always a good idea to review my posts, of course, but do also look at what you and your classmates said on each topic. We have a number of strong students in the class, and I suspect each of you has a handful of classmates whose posts you find particularly interesting and illuminating. Don’t try to reread *every* discussion post, but glance at least at a good selection from each “topic” in each unit. If you have trouble accessing any discussions, let me know right away.

If you highlighted or annotated the texts as you read them, great! Definitely look back over the works themselves. Perhaps most importantly, seek, reread, and study specific passages in each work that focus most directly on the work’s central themes, or the angles we’ve covered in discussions. 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. If you do so, you may refer to your distilled notes while taking the exam, though the process of reducing all your various expansive notes down into such a short document in itself can serve as excellent preparation for a test. Here, too, you don’t want to waste time thumbing through pages and pages of notes, but if you have just two or three pages, you can refer to these notes quickly with very little loss of time.

I hope you all do well! Once you open the exam and get started, the clock will run and you cannot pause—but in the day or two leading up to the exam, definitely feel free to contact me with questions.

I hope, too, that none of you will be so foolish as to use the web for “help” during the exam—absolutely NOT a good idea.

One last thing: do *study!*