

Cornell University
English Graduate Program

You
&
Your
Q

The Qualifying Examination is a diagnostic stage in the graduate program, a moment for the taking of your pulse as a scholar and critic, a chance for your committee to get together with you to get an idea of how you are doing, how your interests are shaping up, what sorts of things in literary studies tend to catch your eye, and how persuasively, clearly, and accurately you can convey your response to the texts on your short list. The Q-Exam is a conversation with your committee about the texts on your short list, but a conversation whose shape and focus is largely in your control. Your committee members are free to ask you anything that comes to

mind about the texts, of course, but the questions they are likeliest to ask will be ones prompted by what you bring to the table yourself.

■ **short list as structure**

As you think about the links between the works on your short list, remember that it's not vital to have a single overarching structure or a governing rubric under which every item on the list can be corralled. In most cases, two or three or four rough clusterings of the dozen works will make the most sense, groupings that may cut across period and genre boundaries, or embrace them, or some combination of the two. Again, thinking about teaching may be a useful way to get a handle on how to think about your short list as a unit. If your short list were the syllabus for a selective survey course, what would you focus on, which texts would you urge the students to put in relation, and how? What kinds of paper topics can you imagine constructing to elicit an awareness of such relations between texts? If you were teaching a novel on your list, which chapters or incidents might you bring to students' attention, and how would you encourage students to think about the function of these nodes in the narrative to the larger scope of the work? You might wish to look at a passage from a novel in detail, and use that as a jumping-off point for a more inclusive discussion of the novel or its relation to other works on your short list.

■ **short list as mixture I**

The conversations you may have with your committee as you are putting together your short list can be a valuable part of the whole procedure of the Q-Exam. The best use of the Q is probably to aim for a mix of works on the list: a few items could be works you have a deep and long-standing familiarity with and a strong affinity for—favorites, simply; others could be works you have studied or written about in graduate courses or which you are teaching; and at least two or three could well be works that you are reading for the first time in order to prepare for the exam in order to “fill the gaps” in your knowledge of literature.

■ **short list as mixture II**

It probably makes sense to have a mixture of genres, as well as a sampling of literary periods, on your short list. Remember that your A-Exam will be the occasion to show what you know in the fields of your specialization, so the Q-Exam is an appropriate moment to demonstrate how you think about eras, genres, or texts you are unlikely to return to as you

progress through the program. Future narratologists should have poetry and drama well represented on the Q-Exam short list; those planning a dissertation on poetry should have two or three or four novels on the list; those likely to focus on canonical authors may wish to include emergent fields of literature on the Q-Exam; future Americanists should have a generous sampling of English literature. If you are bent on writing a dissertation on Coleridge, the Q-Exam is your chance—perhaps your last chance—to hold forth on Cooper (and Cowper, and Chaucer and Cheever, and Kipling and Koestenbaum).

■ **theory**

What about texts in theory, essays, and other texts beyond poems, prose fiction, and plays? For some students it may be appropriate to include such items on the short list. Students with a strong grounding in theory should be able to display their strengths on the Q-Exam, but also use it as an occasion to read works of literature they haven't yet grappled with. It is probably less likely that students who are new to theory will be urged to include theoretical or critical texts to their short list, but students who wish to use the exam as a spur to read theory may wish to include some works of theory on the short list.

■ **teaching as a model**

Since most students will also be teaching for the first time in the semester of the Q, the exam is also an occasion for your committee to get a glimpse of how you might come across as a classroom presence. There are a number of ways to approach your exam, and you should, of course, discuss the expectations of your committee, and work out the scope and format of the exam with them, at least in its outline, before you meet for the exam itself. But a few guidelines should make it easier for you to figure out how to prepare effectively for the exam. For the purposes of the Q-Exam, it is probably wiser and more practical to imagine your committee as a class of bright Cornell juniors to whom are teaching the texts of your short list than as the editorial board of *PMLA* to whom you are presenting twelve compacted and dazzlingly original abstracts of articles about each item on your short list. In other words, don't shy away from saying some things about the texts on your short list that may seem obvious, and might appear too basic to mention in an article for a professional audience, but are a necessary groundwork for any discussion of the text.

■ setting the terms of the discussion

A perfectly reasonable way for a Q-Exam to begin might be simply to ask you to say something about how the texts on your short list relate to each other, in your reading of them. Don't expect to be subject to a barrage of specific questions at the outset; do be prepared to set the terms of the discussion, through specific reference to the texts. "What interested you about *King Lear* as you were preparing for this exam?" is a more likely opening question than "Compare the fool in *King Lear* and three other plays" or "Which text of *King Lear* do you find most reliable?" though you should have sufficient command of the play to have a response to questions like these as well. The exam should be designed to allow you and your committee to have the most interesting, broad-ranging, and yet focused discussion of the texts of your short list possible within the 60 or 90 minutes of the exam. The discussion is likeliest to be interesting when you have a solid, specific recall of the texts as well as a set of frameworks for discussing them in light of each other.

■ preparing the texts

For example: If you're planning to talk in some detail about a poem as part of the exam, one way to frame the task of preparing to offer such a reading is to imagine yourself preparing the poem to teach it. Before stepping into the classroom, you'd want to be ready for any questions your students might direct to you about the meaning of specific words and references in the poem; you'd want to be able to provide a rough sketch of how the poem unfolds and the affinities it has with other poems of its type, and address any marked verbal knottiness it poses. Familiarity with the history of responses the poem has garnered would also be useful to you if you were teaching the poem, and such preparation is also appropriate for the Q-Exam. Locating a handful of recent articles (or a mix of recent and standard critical treatments of the poem) is probably a good idea, and you should feel free beforehand to consult your committee to see if they have any specific recommendations. For the novels on your short list, again think about what you'd want to have at your fingertips as a teacher: an exhilarating gift for unpacking a paragraph from the novel is of dubious use if you're shaky on who does what to whom where and when, or don't command a general knowledge of where the interpretive cruxes of the novel have been held to lie—even if you go on to find them elsewhere. If you've got Book IX of *Paradise Lost* on your short list, it's expected that you'd have little difficulty giving an account what Satan says to Eve and what she says to him, as well as what Eve carried with her when she

"Betook her to the groves, but Delia's self / In gait surpassed," and who Delia is. Here in the fallen world, such specificity of recall is "of sapience no small part," and the necessary groundwork for fashioning a compelling reading or simply for having a substantial discussion of the text at hand. It is not, of course, primarily your powers of recall that are on trial at the Q-Exam, but your strengths as a reader of literature; it's more or less to be taken for granted that you can call to mind with considerable vividness and precision any work of literature you are prepared to make claims about during a Q-Exam, or in a classroom, or in a piece of professional writing.

■ specificity & flexibility

You may set the overall contours of the exam with the materials you prepare, but at the same time be ready to talk about matters beyond the particular readings you have worked out. A solid grounding in the texts on your short list should give you both the equipment to suggest an interpretive framework for them, and the flexibility to field questions that urge you to think beyond such frameworks. It can be a tricky business, striking a balance between a pre-packaged spiel and the spontaneity of response possible only with a thoroughgoing familiarity with the texts—but this trickiness is precisely what one is faced with when behind the desk in the literature classroom, so it seems a reasonable challenge for a Q-Exam.

■ what to bring

In recent years it's become a common practice for students to bring poems, passages from novels, and other texts to the exam, making copies of less well-known materials for everyone to look at during the discussion. Check with your committee to see if this format makes sense to them. Your committee may also suggest you bring notes or other materials to the exam, but you should also be prepared to speak about texts you don't have in front of you—don't be surprised if your committee feels prompted to ask you briefly to compare a text on the short list with a work on your long list, for instance.

■ on not knowing

It's to be expected that at some point in your Q-Exam you'll reach a point where your truest response to a question is "I don't know" or "I don't remember" or "I'll have to read that book again." That's not a bad sign—it suggests that the exam has done its job of giving you and your committee a fair picture of the range of your knowledge and the scope and depth of your familiarity with the texts on

your short and long lists. Be prepared to say you don't know when you don't, and recognize this moment as an expected event during a Q-Exam, and not a sign that you haven't done well.

■ written work

Your committee should have read one long paper you have produced since entering the graduate program. In most cases, the committee will turn its attention to the paper during the post-exam discussion, but it's certainly possible for material from the paper to enter the conversation of the exam proper.

■ format

Sometimes a Q-Exam is a loosely structured, open discussion among four people, each member of the committee chiming in as the spirit moves or the focus of the discussion shifts. In other cases—perhaps in most cases—each member of your committee might take twenty minutes or so to be your primary interlocutor about three or four texts on your short list.

■ after the exam

When the discussion is over, you'll be asked to leave the room for a few minutes while the committee gathers its thoughts and prepares to talk with you about your performance on the exam. It's probably a good idea to supplement this post-exam discussion with individual conferences with members of your committee in the weeks following your exam, after you've had a chance to assess the experience (and to celebrate passing your Q-Exam).

■ Sample Short Lists

1. "The Wife of Bath's Tale"

The Faerie Queene, Book III

Twelfth Night

"Good Friday, 1613. Riding Westward"

Paradise Lost IV

Epistle 2, "To a Lady"

The Country Wife

Mansfield Park

The Prelude, Book I

"The Lotos-Eaters"

What Maisie Knew

"Sailing to Byzantium"

2. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

Second Shepherds' Play

Utopia

Astrophil and Stella (Sonnets 1, 2, 31, 52, 71)

The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus

Bacon, "Of Superstition"

"Il Penseroso"

An Essay Concerning Human Understanding

(selections)

Robinson Crusoe

Dorothy Wordsworth, *Journals* (selections)

Mill, *The Subjection of Women* (selections)

Modern Love (1, 2, 17, 49, 50)

3. *Troilus and Criseide* (selections)

Troilus and Cressida

Chapman's *Iliad* Book IV

Hero and Leander

"Eloisa to Abelard"

"The Eve of St. Agnes"

The Scarlet Letter

Freud, *Studies in Hysteria*

Lolita

Beloved

Omeros (selections)

"How I Learned to Drive"

4. *A Book of Showings to the anchoress Julian of*

Norwich (selections)

The White Devil

"The Garden"

Pamela

"Elegy in a Country Churchyard"

The Marriage of Heaven and Hell

"Kubla Khan"

Aurora Leigh (selections)

Woman in the Nineteenth Century

Tess of the D'Urbervilles

The Importance of Being Earnest

Harrison, "v."

Q & A

Does the committee for the Q-Exam have to be my permanent committee?

One purpose of the Q is to help you to judge whether your committee seems a good match for your interests, scholarly temperament, and critical tastes. It's not uncommon to make some changes in your committee by the time you're ready for the A-Exam.

When should I take the Q-Exam?

At the start of your third semester or the end of your second.

What's the best way to decide which piece of writing to show my committee as part of the exam?

If you have more than one substantial paper you've written since you arrived at Cornell, choose the one that seems to you to best represent your current cast of mind as a scholar of literature, or the one to which you'd most value your committee's response.

What kinds of recommendations can I expect from my committee in the post-exam discussion?

Your committee will point out what they found strongest in your exam, and areas in which you might do further work. They may recommend a course of reading, or taking a course, or they may simply wish you well and congratulate you on a job well done. The post-exam discussion should also include keeping your committee up to date on the work you've been doing in foreign languages, and might well include some informal chat about how your teaching is going, if you are teaching.

What happens if I fail the Q-Exam?

Oh, please. If you have a strong grasp of the works on your short list, you'll do fine.

