

A Guiding Model Answer for

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Cultural Subject (1) Exam

Respond to the following questions:

1. What are the major elements of Aristotelian Tragedy?
(Time limit is **40 minutes**)
2. Discuss the theme of knowledge and ignorance in Sophocles' play *Oedipus the King*? (Time limit is **20 minutes**)
3. What is Carrie's "given nature?" To what extent is it responsible for her fate? (Time limit is **40 minutes**)
4. Discuss the theme of materialism in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*? (Time limit is **20 minutes**)
5. Is Hamlet's indecision and reluctance to act an indication of weakness?
(Time limit is **40 minutes**)
6. Discuss the theme of choices and consequences in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*? (Time limit is **20 minutes**)

Good Luck
Mohammad Al-Hussini Arab

Answers

Question # 1:

What are the major elements of Aristotelian Tragedy?

Answer:

The major elements or parts of a tragedy, according to Aristotle, are: plot, character, thought, diction, song, and spectacle, and skene. Plot, the first most important element, is the story of what happens to the characters. Dramatic plots are often divided into five parts: exposition, rising action, turning point, falling action, and denouement. Exposition is the background information necessary to understand the drama. Usually this information is presented at the beginning of the play. : At the beginning of a play, the forces of conflict that drive the action to its conclusion are latent, at rest, so, a rising action is an incident which spurs the conflict on, bringing it into the open. Turning point is a reversal, a discovery that marks a victory or a defeat for the main character. Often the turning point will occur near the middle of the play. It does not mark the end of the action, or the utter victory or defeat of the main character. Rather, it is an indicator of the direction the action is taking and a predictor of its final result. Falling action completes the defeat or reversal marked by the turning point. Denouement explains the action.

Aristotle's second element is character. A reader depends on dialogue and actions to infer the personality of the characters. Except for stage directions, there is no narrative voice interpreting the stage directions and the action for us. Repeated phrases are a means of establishing character, as are repeated actions or associations with objects.

Aristotle's third element is thought. Thought might be taken up together with diction; it is through diction that thought, or theme is revealed to the reader. A simple statement of the play's theme will not adequately sum up all that the playwright has implied. The meaning of a play is often to be found in objects repeatedly associated with a character or an idea throughout the play. Through dialogue, the words spoken by one character to another, a playwright expects the audience to see with an inward eye the essential nature of the characters.

The remaining elements are song (or music), spectacle, and skene (*scene* or *scenery*). Music is another feature of a performance a play. In ancient Greek plays, the chorus, a group of actors who chanted their lines and collectively represented a public voice commenting on the action, originally sang and danced as part of the drama. Like music, spectacle—the use of scenery, costumes, and special lightings effects—can enhance a performance. Finally, the skene (*scene* or *scenery*) is the building that provided the background against which the Greek plays were set.

Question # 2:

Discuss the theme of knowledge and ignorance in Sophocles' play *Oedipus the King*?

Answer:

Oedipus's desire to gain knowledge that will help to rid Thebes of its pollution is evident from the beginning of the play. When the priest comes to him to ask for help, Oedipus has already begun the process of searching for solutions; he has sent Creon to Delphi to learn from Apollo what measures should be taken. When Creon enters, Oedipus begins questioning him intensely, declares a search for Laius's murderer, and asks for Teiresias's assistance as well as that of others; when a member of the chorus offers information Oedipus says "tell me. I am interested in all reports." His strong belief that the search for the truth will lead to a successful cleansing of Thebes is juxtaposed with the reluctance on the part of other characters to deliver their knowledge. Most fear retribution, since their knowledge points to Oedipus as the source of Thebes's troubles. This belief should also be understood in the context of Oedipus's ignorance and final, tragic discovery of his identity; by demanding that others tell him all they know he is forced to confront the hideous facts of his patricide and incest.

Question # 3:

What is Carrie's "given nature?" To what extent is it responsible for her fate?

Answer:

Carrie Meeber, the title character in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, enters Chicago as a small-town girl attracted by the "alladdinish" allure of the city, which promises escape from the dreary existence she leads working in a shoe factory and living with her sister's family. Suiting her virtue to the circumstances, she ascends the social ladder of lovers, from traveling salesman Charles Drouet to George Hurstwood, the manager of a high-class saloon. Her climb culminates in a Broadway theatre career that brings fame and financial independence but neither fulfillment nor happiness.

The event structure of the novel resembles a "ladder of beauty," each rung of which equals an object of Carrie's dreams and stimulates a desire for something higher and better; each time she rises a rung, a higher one acquires an irresistible luster for her. The movement from country to city, from her family to Drouet, from Drouet to Hurstwood, and from Hurstwood to the theatre features a pattern of stimulus and response that plays on Carrie's tropistic attraction to beauty and luxury. Chance adds a final touch to the determinism that shapes this sequence. Carrie's meetings with Drouet on the train and in Chicago are determined by chance. Chance also governs the discovery of Hurstwood's infidelity by his wife, as it does his theft from the safe and Carrie's discovery of the crime. At critical moments, chance combines with desire to produce the deterministic event, thereby undercutting the individual's free will.

Carrie's "given nature" is also part of the web of deterministic forces governing her career. Her dominant trait is a desire for material comfort that controls the pattern of her movements, the decisions she makes, and ultimately her fate. Underlying Carrie's materialistic yearning is the fear of poverty that exerts a deterministic influence on her career. As Dreiser states, "fine clothes were for her a vast persuasion," or again, "then a new luster would come upon something, and therewith it would become for her the desire—the all," and yet again, "she longed and longed and longed." Carrie Meeber is victimized by her own "commodity fetishism." It is for her "to be the pursuit of that radiance . . . which tints the distant hilltops."

Supplementing the novel's deterministic forces is the influence the environment has upon Carrie's career. Chicago is depicted as a massive entity utterly indifferent to the desiring self: "these vast buildings, what were they?" As Dreiser notes, "it seemed as if it was all closed to her." The city and its harsh economic realities are compacted into a universe of force, embodied in the shoe factory where she briefly works and the faceless canyons of the city, quickening her desire to escape this bleak realm of poverty. The impersonal drabness of the factory prompts Carrie to quit her job and become Drouet's mistress, even as Chicago's mansions exert an attraction upon her, prompting her desire to move to the next rung of the ladder and to abandon Drouet for Hurstwood.

Carrie's essential passivity in the face of deterministic forces is reinforced by images of her as a "wisp on the wind" and a "waif on the tide." Her passivity is underscored by her association with an "Aeolian lute" that fortune pipes upon, while images associated with "chemism," "currents," and "magnetism" reinforce the deterministic power of sexual drives. Finally, the rocking chair at the novel's end resonates with multiple connotations for Carrie's "given nature," suggesting that she has moved without going anywhere. It further symbolizes her outward comfort and her inner spiritual restlessness, insofar as she is surrounded by all she has desired, save that which she desired above all: the perfect all. Her seat in the rocking chair suggests that she is doomed to suffer insatiable longing. Her materialism may have brought comfort, fame, and friends, but not happiness.

Question # 4:

Discuss the theme of materialism in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*?

Answer:

The concept of materialism is another, darker aspect of the American dream explored in *Death of a Salesman*. Willy, Linda, and Hap, more so than Biff, want to own the best of everything associated with the good life, no matter what the cost economically or personally. One reason for Willy's distress is the amount of payments he owes on consumer items such as refrigerators, cars, washing machines, vacuums, and the like, as well as upkeep on said items. He also has a mortgage that is nearly paid off as well as a life insurance policy about to lapse for nonpayment. The Lomans have lived beyond Willy's salary for some time, embracing materialism as a physical embodiment of Willy's economic success.

Because Willy is not the success he tells everyone he is, this situation leads to increasing problems for him and his family. If they had budgeted their money and not bought items on the market because of advertising—Linda explains why they bought their refrigerator because "They got the biggest ads of any of them!"—the family's financial situation might be different when Willy loses his job. As it stands, he sees the only way to help his family is to kill himself. That way, they will get the \$20,000 from their insurance policy, pay off debts, and perhaps start a business. Even Linda recognizes that "We're free" at the play's end. However, this freedom has come at a price. A few lines earlier, she tells Willy's grave that "I made the last payment on the house today. And there'll be nobody home."

Question # 5:

Is Hamlet's indecision and reluctance to act an indication of weakness?

Answer:

What we watch in Hamlet is an agonizing confrontation between the will of a good and intelligent man and the disagreeable role which circumstance calls upon him to play. The disagreeable role is the one of the revenger. The early description of Hamlet, bereft by the death of his father and the hasty marriage of his mother, makes him a prime candidate to assume such a role. His father, whom he deeply loved and admired, is recently deceased and he himself seems to have been finessed out of his birthright. Shakespeare emphasized Hamlet's shock at Gertrude's disrespect to the memory of his father rather than love of mother as the prime source of his distress. The very situation breeds suspicion, which is reinforced by the ghastly visitation by the elder Hamlet's ghost and the ghost's disquieting revelation. The ingredients are all there for bloody revenge.

As Hamlet has been a student of theology, his knowledge complicates the situation. First of all, he is aware of the fundamental immorality of the connection between Gertrude and Claudius. Hamlet's accusation of incest is not an adolescent excess but an accurate theological description of a marriage between a widow and her dead husband's brother. Hamlet's theological accomplishments do more than exacerbate his feelings. For the ordinary revenger, the commission from the ghost of the murdered father would be more than enough to start the bloodletting. But Hamlet is aware of the unreliability of otherworldly apparitions, and consequently he is reluctant to heed the ghost's injunction to perform an action which is objectively evil. In addition, the fear that his father was murdered in a state of sin and is condemned to hell not only increases Hamlet's sense of injustice but also, paradoxically, casts further doubt on the reliability of the ghost's exhortation. Is the ghost, Hamlet wonders, merely an infernal spirit goading him to sin?

Thus, Hamlet's indecision is not an indication of weakness, but the result of his complex understanding of the moral dilemma with which he is faced. He is unwilling to act unjustly, yet he is afraid that he is failing to exact a deserved retribution. He debates the murky issue and becomes unsure himself whether his behavior is caused by moral doubt or

cowardice. He is in sharp contrast with the cynicism of Claudius and the wordy moral platitudes of Polonius. Hamlet's intelligence has transformed a stock situation into a unique internal conflict.

He believes that he must have greater certitude of Claudius' guilt if he is to take action. The device of the play within a play provides greater assurance that Claudius is suffering from a guilty conscience, but it simultaneously sharpens Hamlet's anguish. Having seen a re-creation of his father's death and Claudius' response, Hamlet is able to summon the determination to act. However, he once again hesitates when he sees Claudius in prayer because he believes that the king is repenting and, if murdered at that moment, will go directly to heaven. Here Hamlet's inaction is not the result of cowardice or moral ambiguity. Rather, after all of his agonizing, Hamlet once decided on revenge is so thoroughly committed that his passion cannot be satiated except by destroying his uncle body and soul. It is ironic that Claudius has been unable to repent and that Hamlet is thwarted this time by the combination of his theological insight with the extreme ferocity of his vengeful intention.

That Hamlet loses his mental stability is clear in his behavior toward Ophelia and in his subsequent meanderings. Circumstance had enforced a role whose enormity has overwhelmed the fine emotional and intellectual balance of a sensitive, well-educated young man. Gradually he regains control of himself and is armed with a cold determination to do what he decides is the just thing. Yet, even then, it is only in the carnage of the concluding scenes that Hamlet finally carries out his intention. Having concluded that "the readiness is all," he strikes his uncle only after he has discovered Claudius' final scheme to kill him and Laertes, but by then he is mortally wounded.

The arrival of Fortinbras seems to indicate that a new order will prevail in the place of the evil of Claudius and the weakness of Hamlet. Fortinbras brings stasis and stability back to a disordered kingdom, but he does not have the self-consciousness and moral sensitivity which destroy and redeem Hamlet. Thus, Hamlet, by the conflict of his ethical will with his role, has purged the revenger of his horrific bloodthirstiness and turned the stock figure into a self-conscious hero in moral conflict.

Question # 6:

Discuss the theme of choices and consequences in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*?

Answer:

Ahab is both a hero and a villain. In making a choice and sticking by it, he can be seen as valiantly exercising free will. But the consequences of his decision transform him into a villain, responsible for the death of such innocents as Pip and good men like Starbuck. His monomania or obsession chains him to a fate worse than that which might have prevailed had he not so stubbornly pursued his goal. Contrasting readings of the novel are possible, and most turn upon the interpretation of the character of Ahab and the choices he makes—or, rather, towards the end of the book, the choices he refuses to make. "Not too late is it, even now," Star-buck cries out to him on the third day of the climactic chase. The question is, in depicting a number of situations in which Ahab is given the possibility of drawing back, is Melville establishing a flaw in the individual character, or is he emphasizing the predestined and inescapable quality of the novel's conclusion?

For much of the final encounter, the white whale behaves as any ordinary whale caught up in the chase, but in its last rush at the boat, "Retribution, swift vengeance, eternal malice were in his whole aspect." These are exactly the qualities which Ahab himself has exhibited during the voyage. Ahab is finally seen as both defined and consumed by fate. When, at the end of the novel, Ishmael, the lone survivor, is finally picked up and rescued by the *Rachel*, we are reminded that he had become a member of the crew as the result of an act of free will rather than necessity, as a means of escaping thoughts of death.