

Margaret Atwood W. H. Auden William Blake

MFA

COMPREHENSIVE POETRY EXAM QUESTIONS - MASTERLIST

Charles Baudelaire Elizabeth Bishop Gwendolyn Brooks Robert Bly
Robert Browning Lucille Clifton Robert Creeley E. E. Cummings Bei Dao
Emily Dickinson John Donne Rita Dove Paul Dunbar T.S. Eliot
Robert Frost Alan Ginsberg H. D. Robert Hass Gerard Manley Hopkins

SUBJECTS & THEMES, PERIODS & TRADITIONS

- "IMAGINATION," METAPHOR, SYMBOL, MYTH
- RELIGIOUS POETRY AND BELIEF
- POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONTENT / THEMES
- "LARGENESS" (OF SUBJECTS, THEMES, STYLES)
- PLACE
- THE COMMONPLACE
- EROTICISM & DEATH
- WOMEN POETS
- AFRICAN-AMERICAN POETS
- GAY & LESBIAN POETS

Langston Hughes Richard Hugo John Keats Denise Levertov Phillip Levine

FORMAL ELEMENTS & CONVENTIONS

- EVOLUTION OF FORMAL ELEMENTS & CONVENTIONS
- FORMAL INNOVATION / FORMALISM VS. FREE VERSE
- DRAMATIC POETRY
- OTHER FORMAL / NONFORMAL CONVENTIONS

Federico Lorca Robert Lowell Mira Lov Galway Kinnell W.S. Merwin

INFLUENCE, AFFILIATION, "MOVEMENTS," COMPARISON & CONTRAST

- INFLUENCE, AFFILIATION, "MOVEMENTS," COMPARISON & CONTRAST
- CONFESSIONAL POETRY
- LANGUAGE
- TRANSLATION
- HUMOR
- QUESTIONING THE LIST ITSELF

Marianne Moore Oden Nash Pablo Neruda Frank O'Hara Sharon Olds

RELATION OF LIST TO STUDENT'S OWN WRITING

- RELATION OF THE LIST TO STUDENT'S OWN WRITING
- TEACHING
- RIVALRIES / JUDGING
- PERFORMANCE
- CRITICAL RECEPTION
- PARTYING

Wilfred Owen Sylvia Plath Stanley Plumly Ezra Pound Adrienne Rich
Rainer Maria Rilke Theodore Roethke Christina Rossetti Anne Sexton
Leopold Senghor Siphho Sepamia Charles Simic Gary Snyder Wallace Stevens
Mark Strand James Tate Cesar Vallejo Walt Whitman Richard Wilbur
William Carlos Williams William Wordsworth James Wright

SUBJECTS & THEMES, PERIODS & TRADITIONS

— “IMAGINATION,” METAPHOR, SYMBOL, MYTH —

1. Discuss the use of myth, symbolism, and their simulacra in the work of two of the following:

Zbigniew Herbert, Theodore Roethke, Francis Ponge, Adrienne Rich

2. Discuss the poet as visionary, using any three of the following poets on your list: Walt Whitman, W.B. Yeats, Theodore Roethke, Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Robert Bly, Bob Dylan. In what ways are the poets “visionaries” or “prophets” or “see-ers”—psychologically? socially? politically? metaphysically? What kind of impact do they have on the culture(s) around them?

3. Both Blake and Rimbaud are visionary poets: they have had experiences other, less sighted people have not had. Compare the different qualities of their visions—their connection to the mundane world, the kinds of exaltations involved, their centrality, and their persistence. Why did Blake’s visions continue and develop throughout his lifetime while Rimbaud renounced his and called them “lies” and “slops?”

3.a. Blake, Yeats and Ginsberg are visionary poets: they have had experiences other, less sighted people have not had. Compare the different qualities of their visions—their connection to the mundane world, the kinds of exaltations involved, the impact of visions on the poetry, and their persistence. Did the visions continue and develop throughout each poet’s lifetime? In later life, did any of the poets renounce or qualify his earlier visionary claims?

William Blake, W.B. Yeats, Allen Ginsberg

4. William Blake and James Merrill may both be said to have created private cosmologies. Choose one of these two poets and discuss this aspect of his work.

5. In a review of F.D. Reeve’s translations of Aleksandr Blok, Margaret Atwood says “that many-headed hydra Symbolism rears its perplexing heads.” How is Symbolism “many-headed” and how are the heads “perplexing”? To support your argument, discuss the work of at least three of the following poets:

Charles Baudelaire, W.B. Yeats, Arthur Rimbaud, Wallace Stevens, Rainer Maria Rilke, T.S. Eliot

6. Both Imagism and Surrealism can be discussed as reactions against Symbolism or as continuations of it. For example, among the critics, Rimbaud is sometimes considered Symbolist, sometimes a (Proto-) Surrealist. And among the critics, Pound’s Imagist manifestoes are sometimes seen as an attempt to break with Symbolism and its turn-of-the-century incarnations, sometimes as a mere refinement of Symbolist doctrines. Discuss the relation of either Imagism or Surrealism to Symbolism, using at least three authors on your list. How would you relate your own poetry to these traditions?

7. Consider the riddling, gnomic, or cryptic element in three of the following poets. How would you characterize it? What purpose does it serve for the poet? For the reader? Why should we bother?

Emily Dickinson, James Joyce, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Marianne Moore, Hart Crane, John Berryman, Theodore Roethke, Sylvia Plath, Robert Creeley, Charles Simic, Heather McHugh

8. Discuss “Imagination” in the work of two of the poets listed below. What is the nature of imagination in the thought of each poet? What mental, temporal or spiritual powers are contrasted with it? What connections can you make between the poet’s beliefs about imagination and the poet’s poetic practice? (For example, is that practice primarily lyric? narrative? meditative? is it highly metaphoric? descriptive? allegorical?)

William Blake, William Wordsworth, Wallace Stevens, Elizabeth Bishop

8.a. Discuss “imagination” in two of the poets listed below. Are “vision” and “imagination” synonymous for these writers? What is the nature of imagination in the thought of these poets? What mental, or temporal, or religious powers are contrasted with it? What connections can you make between the poet’s beliefs and his or her poetic practices?

Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Hart Crane, W.B. Yeats, Theodore Rilke, Wallace Stevens, Elizabeth Bishop, Theodore Roethke, James Wright, Allen Ginsberg, Denise Levertov

9. Richard Howard titled his collection of essays on contemporary American poetry *Alone With America*. By that acts of vision, imagination, intellect and language did two of the following poets strive to overcome their “aloneness”—in America and in the Universe?

Wallace Stevens, Elizabeth Bishop, James Wright, Maxine Kumin, Adrienne Rich, Sharon Olds

SUBJECTS & THEMES, PERIODS & TRADITIONS

— RELIGIOUS POETRY AND BELIEF —

1. Donne, Milton, Dickinson, Eliot, Roethke, the early Lowell, the late Sexton, and Charles Wright are all intensely religious poets, yet their poetry is radically different. What relationship do you see between the forms of belief in these poets and the more technical aspects of their verse? Choose at least two of these poets and discuss and contrast the relationship between their beliefs or religious sentiments and such matters as rhythm, diction, syntax, and tone.
2. T. S. Eliot and Czeslaw Milosz are both religious poets. Discuss how the urges of religious experience manifest in each of their poetries. Milosz considers himself to be an heir of Blake; Eliot's connections to Dante are well known: discuss how the two poets' work relates to that of their predecessors, and to the tradition of religious poetry in general.
3. Many of the writers on your list are intensely religious poets—notably, Donne, Blake, Dickinson, Eliot, Milosz. Choosing two of these writers, discuss how the urges of religious experience manifest in each of their poetries. What relationship do you see between the forms of belief and the forms of their language—i.e., rhythm, diction, syntax, tone? What relationship do you see between their religious inclinations and the pressures and conditions of the eras in which they lived?
4. There are overtly religious poets—Hopkins is an obvious example. Yet many are strongly interested in matters of the spirit, notably Emily Dickinson, William Butler Yeats, Rainer Maria Rilke, Hart Crane, Cesar Vallejo, Antonio Machado, Theodore Roethke, Robert Bly and Denise Levertov. Choosing two of these poets, discuss how the urges of religious experience manifest in each of their poetries. What relationship do you see between the forms of belief and the forms of their language—i.e., rhythm, diction, syntax, and tone. What relationship do you see between their religious inclinations and the pressures and conditions of the eras in which they lived?
5. If a religious poet such as Edward Taylor or Gerard Manley Hopkins has a heretical thought, presumably, his scruples will prevent him from affirming it, no matter how rhetorically effective it might be. If, on the other hand, Walt Whitman or Allen Ginsberg has a thought, he has no criterion by which to exclude it. True or False? What are the limitations and dangers of beliefs for a poet? What are the strengths of belief? What are the limitations, dangers, and strengths of a lack of beliefs. Be sure to support your arguments with specific references to at least two of these poets.
6. In his essay on Baudelaire, T.S. Eliot argues that Baudelaire's sense of life was primarily religious, even if Baudelaire was not, like Eliot himself, a convert. Do you agree with Eliot? Could the same be said of Rilke? Lorca? O'Hara? Crane? What defines "the religious sensibility" Eliot invokes? How does that definition have to be modified in order to apply it to the other poets? Compare and contrast one or two of the poets just listed with Baudelaire in terms of "religious sensibility."
7. T.S. Eliot was neither a 14th Century Italian Catholic nor a 17th Century English Catholic, yet he was profoundly influenced by Dante and Donne. He drew upon these two poets in his own poems and wrote about them in some of the most important critical essays of our century. What was it Dante and Donne that made them, in Eliot's view, important for Twentieth Century poets and readers of poetry? In what sense do they exemplify "the presence of the past"? Be sure to discuss specific poetic elements, specific poems, and specific points from Eliot's criticism.
8. Several of the poets on your list are intensely religious poets—notably, Dickinson, Eliot and Milosz. Others seem strongly interested in what Rimbaud called "les puissances de l'esprit"—the things of the spirit—notably Robert Bly, Pablo Neruda, Rainer Marie Rilke. Choosing two of these writers, discuss how the urges of religious experience manifest in each of their poetries. What relationship do you see between the forms of belief and the forms of their language—i.e., rhythm, diction, syntax, tone? What relationship do you see between their religious inclinations and the pressures and conditions of the eras in which they lived?

SUBJECTS & THEMES, PERIODS & TRADITIONS

POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONTENT / THEMES

1. Blake, Shelley, and Byron were all intensely political and social poets, yet their poetries differ markedly. How can the term “Romantic” be defined so as to include in a fruitful way some of the more profound divergences in their visions?
2. Shelley, Byron, Keats. Whose work most fully embodies “The Romantic Ideal”?
3. Social consciousness, the wish for social change, can be manifested in the most direct or oblique ways in poetry. Discuss the uses of direction and indirection in the work of three of the following poets:

W.B. Yeats, Rupert Brooke, Robert Lowell, Adrienne Rich, Robert Hass, C.D. Wright

4. Discuss the social and political sympathies of two of the poets below. How are those sympathies reflected in the very forms and linguistic techniques of their poems?

T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, Margaret Gibson, Philip Levine, Cesar Vallejo, Pablo Neruda

5. You are writing a review essay on recent books of poetry with highly topical content. You have settled on books by Alexander Pope, William Blake and Margaret Atwood because, although the books are thematically and stylistically various, they are all concerned with the same issue. What is the issue? What are the tides of the books? What values are expressed and what connections can you make between those values and the distinctive technical characteristics of the poetry? Write your review essay (be sure to include some quotations).

Alexander Pope, William Blake, Margaret Atwood

6. Several poets on your list have written explicitly “political” poems, or poems in which a sense of the poet’s political consciousness and commitments pervades the work. Discuss the political concerns and the poetic strategies for expressing “political” feelings in three of the poets below.

W.B. Yeats, Langston Hughes, Pablo Neruda, Robert Lowell, Gwendolyn Brooks, James Wright, Philip Levine, Lucille Clifton, Margaret Atwood

7. Zbigniew Herbert and Czeslaw Milosz are contemporary Polish poets: one has chosen a life of exile, the other continues to reside in Poland. Milosz has written: “The poetic act changes with the amount of background reality embraced by the poet’s consciousness. In our century that background is... related to the fragility of those things we call civilization and culture... It could just as well not exist—and so man constructs poetry out of the remnants found in the ruins.” Akhmatova, Herbert and Milosz have attempted in their work to retrieve such remnants, but they have done so in dissimilar ways. Compare and contrast the work of two of these poets.

8. A highly regarded critic has written that Muriel Rukeyser’s “themes were frequently political—the Depression, the Second World War, the war in Vietnam, feminism. She combined an imprecise idiom with committed emotions. A Chinese proverb warns against whipping an ox that is already running, but this is what Rukeyser does. Her poems move persons who already share her emotion before they read the poems.”

Do you agree with this appraisal of Rukeyser’s accomplishment and appeal? Why or why not (or why and why not)? Can the criticism be applied to other poets on your list—for example, Rich, Baraka or Levertov? To what extent is the criticism valid for all “committed poems”?

Discuss Rukeyser and two other poets on your reading list.

9. Until the popularity of the Ecology movement, social consciousness in poetry was often pitted against “Nature” as a value. Even today readers who admire “political” poets often read them solely for that content, ignoring or down-playing the importance of other themes in the work. Yet many of our powerful “political” poets derive their commitment from a broad range of values, often including reverence for Nature. Discuss the relationship between “Nature” and social/political commitment in three of the following poets.

Pablo Neruda, Czeslaw Milosz, Leopold Sedar Senghor, Bei Dao, Joy Harjo

10. “The poetry of witness” has been theorized as a rupture within the problematics of poetry and politics. What is your understanding of the distinction between “poetry of witness” and “political poetry”? How do the writings of Terrence Des Pres, Czeslaw Milosz and Walter Benjamin illuminate the subject of “witness poetry”?

11. The “poetry of witness” includes poetry of exile, war, internment and political repression. Please elaborate, within your understanding of the poetry of witness, its implications for any discussion of prison poetry, or war poetry, or poetry of exile, citing examples from the poets you have read.

12. Czeslaw Milosz has written: “The poetic act changes with the amount of background reality embraced by the poet’s consciousness. In our century that background is... related to the fragility of those things we call civilization and culture... It could just as well not exist—and so man constructs poetry out of the remnants found in the ruins.” Walter Benjamin, in his “Theses On The Philosophy of History,” also alludes to the fragility of civilization and the “growing pile of debris” hurled at the feet of the Angel of History. Please discuss the idea of poetry as “retrieved from the wreckage of civilization.”

13. Several poets on your list experienced conditions of social and political extremity during the twentieth century: wathre, internment, forced exile, military occupation, imprisonment. Choose two of the following poets and discuss their work in light of this experience. What strategies did they deploy in coming to terms with such experience in their work? How would you characterize the impress of extremity on their poetry?

H.D., Gertrude Stein, Paul Celan, Anna Akhmatova, Odysseas Elytis, George Oppen, Arkadil Dragomoschenko

SUBJECTS & THEMES, PERIODS & TRADITIONS

“LARGENESS” (OF SUBJECTS, THEMES, STYLES)

1. Many of the poets on your list are distinguished by the largeness of their subjects and themes. Hopkins, Dickinson, Eliot, Milosz and others tackled God, Life, Death and the meaning of existence. Most interesting, perhaps, is the further presence on your list of poets whose styles and methods can be characterized by largeness, inclusiveness, and allusiveness. Different as they are in other respects, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Whitman, Williams, Pound, Eliot, Milosz, and Graham may all be characterized this way.

Choose two poets from your list and discuss the styles and themes of “largeness” or ‘inclusiveness’ in their work. Ideally, you should choose two poets in whom the application of the idea of “large” or “inclusive” differs significantly, such as Whitman vs. Dickinson, or H.D. vs. Graham.

2. Intelligence, intellectual probity and intensity, manifests quite differently in different poets. Discuss the uses and forms of intelligence in two of the following poets:

Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, W.H. Auden, Elizabeth Bishop, Czeslaw Milosz

SUBJECTS & THEMES, PERIODS & TRADITIONS

PLACE

1. Discuss the importance of place in the poetry of Robert Frost, Elizabeth Bishop, and James Wright.

SUBJECTS & THEMES, PERIODS & TRADITIONS

THE COMMONPLACE

1. Discuss the treatment of domesticity—family relations, household routines and economies, the small events of modest lives—in three of the following poets. What are the subjects? How are language, form, imagery and metaphor accommodated to the subjects? What experiences are offered? What attitudes toward those experiences?

William Carlos Williams, Elizabeth Bishop, Linda Pastan, Myra Sklarew, William Matthews, Philip Levine, Emily Dickinson, Gary Snyder, Sylvia Plath

2. Compare the transformation of the commonplace in one poem each by Yeats, Williams and Stevens. What is similar or different about the kind of ordinariness transformed or exalted? What is similar or different about the means by which the alteration occurs? What is similar or different about that into which it is changed, utterly?

William Carlos Williams, Elizabeth Bishop, Linda Pastan, Myra Sklarew, William Matthews, Philip Levine, Emily Dickinson, Gary Snyder, Sylvia Plath

SUBJECTS & THEMES, PERIODS & TRADITIONS

EROTICISM & DEATH

1. A major component of Blake and Keats is the erotic. Blake is quite open about sexuality, Keats less so. Contrast the erotic in one of Blake's prophetic poems with its use in "The Eve of St Agnes."

2. Death is a time-honored subject in poetry. But many times mortality emerges in the ostensibly benign terms of mutability or change.

The parent of a friend of yours is dying. Your friend would like to read some poetry to help her/him deal with the experience. Which poet would you suggest your friend read, and which poems in particular? Why? Which poet would you suggest your friend stay away from, and which poems in particular? Why?

You may also answer this question as if your friend were looking for poetry to read to the dying parent.

SUBJECTS & THEMES, PERIODS & TRADITIONS

WOMEN POETS

1. Your list includes many important women writers. Using three women poets of different generations, discuss the evolution of women's conceptions of themselves as poets.

2. Your list does not include a large number of women, but those who appear have all written very consciously as women and have expressed distinct attitudes toward the female body. Discuss this aspect in the work of three of these women (from your list). If possible, include some discussion of the rhythms, forms and language of their poems as well as subject matter.

3. Politics is said to be experienced ultimately in the body. Discuss the progress of the feminist movement over the past several generations, as three of the following poets have experienced and related it in their lyrics:

Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, Sharon Olds, Heather McHugh

4. In women's poetry in recent years we have come to associate autobiographical directness with sincerity, as well as with feminist intent. Yet historically much women's poetry has been marked by a quality of masking or reticence, including such features as linguistic compression and syntactical ambiguity; indirect approaches to subject matter; juxtaposition and configuration (as opposed to exposition and statement); the embedded or camouflaged image; and of course the masked or elusive speaker.

Choosing two women from the list below, discuss this quality of reticence or masking in their work. In some cases it may also be appropriate to discuss how they have attempted to break free of this tradition.

Sappho, Anne Bradstreet, Emily Dickinson, Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, Anne Sexton, Gwendolyn Brooks

5. The history of women poets has been marked by figures of immense solitude, and by women who have been forced to make radical decisions about their lives in order to write. Solitude has empowered women poets, but so has the struggle to overcome solitude and create solidarity with other women. Discuss the themes of solitude and solidarity in Dickinson, Bishop, Castellanos and one of the following:

Joy Harjo, Rita Dove, Olga Broumas

SUBJECTS & THEMES, PERIODS & TRADITIONS

— AFRICAN-AMERICAN POETS —

1. Your list includes four important Black poets of different poetic generations and sensibilities. Discuss the evolution and variety of Black American poetry as it is reflected in the work of these four writers (listed below). You may wish to consider such matters as each poet's relation to the canonical English language tradition, the oral and dialect traditions the poet may have worked in, the poet's political and social concerns, and the poet's perceived audience.

Paul Dunbar, Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Lucille Clifton

1.a. (This variation combines elements of questions 1. and 4.) Your list includes important Black poets of many different poetic generations and sensibilities. Discuss the evolution and variety of Black American poetry as it is reflected in the work of any four writers who are 1.) of different generations and 2.) of different sensibilities, and who may be said 3.) to address different audiences. Situate each poet in the larger context within which he or she works. Consider such matters as each poet's relation to the canonical English language tradition, the oral and dialect traditions the poet may have worked in, the poet's political and social concerns, and the poet's perceived audience. Be sure to cite specific poems for each poet.

2. Critics tend to describe and evaluate the works of black poets in different terms than they describe and evaluate the works of white poets. As a corrective to this tendency, show us what the works of Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks have in common with the works of any two white poets on your list.

3. Each of the three African-American poets on your list might be said to address a different audience— even as this sense of audience changes for each of them over time. Discuss each of these poets in relation to her audience at a particular phase of her career.

Gwendolyn Brooks, AudreLorde, Lucille Clifton

4. Compare and contrast the work of Gwendolyn Brooks, Lucille Clifton and Rita Dove. While you want to situate each poet in the larger contexts in which they work (or work against—such as poetic “traditions,” American poetry, women's poetry, black poetry, etc.), be sure as well to work with detailed references to specific poems by each poet.

SUBJECTS & THEMES, PERIODS & TRADITIONS

— GAY & LESBIAN POETS —

1. Many poets on your list are homosexual or bi-sexual. Choosing two, discuss the extent to which homosexuality or bisexuality shaped and informed their work. You may want to consider such questions as the portrayal or masking of erotic experience; the portrayal of friendship and bonding; the experience of being an outsider or a marginalized poet; the effects of the marginal point of view on treatment of other subjects—such as nature, place or politics. If possible, include some discussion of poetic technique, and the community of literary and historical reference in which these poets functioned.

FORMAL ELEMENTS & CONVENTIONS

— EVOLUTION OF FORMAL ELEMENTS & CONVENTIONS —

1. Discuss the epic poem, its history, form and structure, with particular reference to two of the following poets:

Homer, William Blake, Walt Whitman

2. Discuss the uses of narrative in Chaucer and Shakespeare. How are their uses of narrative different? What historical and literary influences may have determined these differences?

2.a. Discuss the use of narrative in three of the following poets. How are their uses of narrative different? Similar? What historical and literary influences may have determined the place of narrative in each poet's work?

William Blake, Walt Whitman, Robert Frost, Dylan Thomas, Elizabeth Bishop, Gwendolyn Brooks, Robert Hayden, Lucille Clifton, Seamus Heaney

3. Several of the poets on your list are known for having written significant elegies. In addition to defining this form in its strict sense, please discuss the elegiac mode as it appears in at least two of the following poets:

Frank O'Hara, A.E. Housman, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Thamos Gray, Ranier Maria Rilke, W.H. Auden

4. Discuss the evolution of the sonnet as we can trace it in the works of three of the following poets:

Thomas Wyatt, William Shakespeare, John Donne, John Milton, Charles Baudelaire, Ranier Maria Rilke, and Robert Lowell

Please note: This is a broad topic and calls for a broad response, but be sure to refer to specific poems and formal characteristics. The following questions may help you formulate your response:

To what extent is this evolution due to the nature of the English language?

To what extent is it due to the sonnet-making impulses (the motivating forces) in each poet?

To what extent to non-literary or extra-literary interests of the poets?

To what extent simply to something we might call "temperament?"

5. You have expressed a distinct interest in the sonnet and its traditions, and yet your list omits many names once commonly associated with its development and perfection in English—Wyatt, Shakespeare, Sidney, Spenser, Milton or the Romantics, to name a few. Discuss the evolution of the sonnet as we can trace it in the work of at least four poets who are on your list.

Please note: This is a broad topic and calls for a broad response, but be sure to refer to specific poems and formal characteristics.

You may want to include some mention of "the sonnet making impulse," of the extent to which changes in the sonnet were due to the language each poet worked in and to non-literary or extra-literary interests of the poet, or to something we might identify simply as "temperament."

6. Discuss the evolution of the long poem as we see it in three of the following poets:

Homer, William Blake, Walt Whitman, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Charles Olson

Please note: This is a large topic and you may iocus or limit it pretty much as you think best; be sure that your essay deals with both form and content, however. Questions you might wish to address include the following:

How does each poet's purpose (that is, the poet's sense of the social function of poetry) influence form and content?

How do new historical and psychological contexts influence form and content?

To what extent do the poet's social, historical, psychological or metaphysical obsessions influence form and content?

6.a. The long poem has changed dramatically in the 20th Century. Discuss two long poems, each by a different author listed below. What was distinctive and "new" (Pound: "Make it new") in each poem? What are the relations between organization, style, and content? Do the two poems have qualities in common which seem to be generally characteristic of the long poem in the 20th Century?

T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, Hart Crane, Theodore Roethke, Francis Ponge, John Berryman

7. The long poetic sequence—that is, the long poem as a structure of juxtaposed or loosely related individual poems—has appealed to many 20th Century poets. Compare and contrast long poetic sequences by two of the poets listed below. How is this kind of sequencing appropriate to each poet's subject and sensibility? What gives each sequence overall unity? What are the advantages of the sequence for the poet—as opposed to the more unified long poem, on the one hand, and as opposed to separate, seemingly less related short poems, on the other.

Rainer Maria Rilke, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, Theodore Roethke, John Berryman, Gwendolyn Brooks, Ted Hughes

FORMAL ELEMENTS & CONVENTIONS

FORMAL INNOVATION / FORMALISM VS. FREE VERSE

1. Iambic pentameter was the work horse of English language prosody from the time of Chaucer until the Twentieth Century. Nonetheless, many pre-Twentieth Century poets greatly extended the subtlety and flexibility of iambic meter or experimented with alternate prosodies, and such extensions and experiments have continued in our time. Using any four of the poets on your list, write a general essay the evolution of English language prosody as it bears on your own work as a poet. “General” does not, of course mean “vague”: be specific about the prosodic discoveries and accomplishments of each poet. Give attention to both the poet’s prosodic contribution to poetry and to the importance of that contribution for your work. And finally, based on your own experiences, what place does the study of prosody have in a poet’s education?

In drawing up your list, please try to achieve a measure of historical and geographical range. That is, do not select all your poets from the same period (e.g. early Twentieth Century, Post World War II) or socio-cultural milieu (e.g., origins in the Imagist movement or Deep Imagist movement).

2. Your list includes a number of poets who were important innovators in form, prosody, and/or technique. What, specifically, attracts you the formal elements of their work? What effects do they achieve that you would like to achieve in your own poetry? What do these poets demonstrate about the relation between form and content?

Gerard Manley Hopkins, Wilfred Owen, Marianne Moore, E.E. Cummings, Dylan Thomas

3. Your list includes a number of writers whose poetry and poetics were rejected (explicitly or implicitly) by the Modernist revolution, and a number of pre-Modernist writers whose poetry and poetics helped foment that revolution. Using at least one poet from each group—a rejected poet, a Modernist, and a pre-Modernist who influenced the Modern—discuss Modernism itself. What was it against? What was it for? What did it produce?

4. Ezra Pound, in a review of the work of Marianne Moore and Mina Loy, utilized most of his space to ramble and pontificate, and then awarded a head-pat to the poets: “These girls have written a distinctly national product.” (Moore was over thirty at the time.) Yet according to the critic William Drake, “the surge of women’s creativity beginning around World War I and cresting in the mid-20’s was one of the phenomenal developments of a revolutionary age. Mina Loy, H.D., Marianne Moore and Gertrude Stein were major Modernist poets.” Discuss the work of any two of them—their poetics, formal concerns, and the nature of the innovations.

5. The debate between open-form (or free-verse) poets and formalists has been going on for over a century now, yet some of our most admired poets have written both kinds of poetry. Discuss the use of both open form and more traditional prosodies in two of the poets listed below. Consider such matters as the periods of each poet’s development, influences on the poet in these periods, and the relation of form and content.

T.S. Eliot, Theodore Roethke, Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, John Berryman, James Wright, Gwendolyn Brooks, Donald Justice, Ted Hughes, Adrienne Rich, Maxine Kumin

5.a. The debate between open-form (or free-verse) poets and formalists has been going on for over a century now, yet some of our most admired poets have written both kinds of poetry. Discuss the use of both open form and more traditional prosodies in two of the poets listed below. Consider such matters as the periods of each poet’s development, influences on the poet in these periods, and the relation of form and content.

James Wright, Donald Hall, Adrienne Rich, Robert Lowell Stanley Kunitz

5.b. Discuss the persistence of formal poetry in the work of two of the poets below. Why and to what extent are these poets committed to traditional forms? What beliefs about language and poetry, order and chaos, reality and the human psyche are conveyed by the poets’ aesthetic stances?

Robert Frost, W. H. Auden, Richard Wilbur, W.D. Snodgrass, Maxine Kumin

6. Khlebnikov was one of the founders of futurism, whose adherents wanted to shock the bourgeois and advocated cultural purge. Other poets on your list have also been considered poetically “revolutionary.” Discuss any two of the following poets, with respect to poetic innovation.

Velimir Khlebnikov, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Robert Creeley, Bel Dao

7. Contemporary poets seem increasingly to be moving away from the free-verse lyric-narrative mode, and toward formalism (referred to as neo-formalism) on the one side, and experimental (L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E) poetry on the other. Although no neo-formalist or Language poets appear on your list, the precursors claimed by both camps do. Choosing one poet from each group, compare and contrast their poetry and aesthetics.

Group A: Robert Frost, Dylan Thomas, Donald Justice, Van Duyxi; Group B: Gertrude Stein, Marianne Moore, Charles Olson, Robert Creeley

8. Your list manifests an interest in the poetry of early twentieth-century and more contemporary experimental movements. Choose two of the following poets, and discuss his/her work in terms of its literary-historical place and importance, the movements in which he/she participated, and his/her experimental concerns:

Apollinaire, Gertrude Stein, Susan Howe, Leslie Scalapino, George Oppen, Arkadii Dragomoschenko, Lynn Hejninian

FORMAL ELEMENTS & CONVENTIONS

DRAMATIC POETRY

1. Discuss the tradition of dramatic poetry (particularly the dramatic monologue) and the use of personae in three of the following poets. What did each poet draw from the tradition and how did each poet “make it new”?

T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost, Edgar Lee Masters, Lucille Clifton, Rachel Hadas

2. Poetry and drama are closely related genres. In addition to Shakespeare, your list includes a number of poets who wrote plays. What qualities are common to both Shakespeare’s plays and his non-theatrical poetry? Do comparable links exist between the poetry and plays of the poets listed below (discuss any one)?

William Shakespeare and one of the following: John Milton, W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, Vincent Millay, Robert Lowell

3. Since the dawn of Romanticism, the ubiquitous poetic “I” has presented itself as an obstacle to poets who want to deal meaningfully with lives other than their own. The development of the Dramatic Monologue is related to this problem, as are other strategies of voice, speaker, and narrative. Choosing two of the poets listed below, discuss how they have presented the lives of others (whether fictional or historical) in their poetry.

Robert Browning, Walt Whitman, Robert Frost, Wilfred Owen, Pablo Neruda, Philip Levine, Margaret Atwood, Rita Dove

FORMAL ELEMENTS & CONVENTIONS

OTHER FORMAL/NONFORMAL CONVENTIONS

1. In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” “Hamlet and His Problems,” and “The Metaphysical Poets,” three brief essays published between 1919 and 1921, T.S. Eliot redefined the meaning of “tradition,” reevaluated parts of the English poetic tradition, introduced a new way of thinking about the creative process in poetry, introduced literary expressions which reverberated through the century, and made certain predictions about the poetry that would speak to the modern reader.

Discuss these essays in relation to Donne, Eliot’s own poetry, and at least one poet since World War II.

2. Among recent MFA reading lists we have received, your list is unusual because it includes a number of 17th Century poets. What do you think is important and vital in the poetry of Donne, Herrick, Marvell and Traherne? Have they been neglected by contemporary poets? (If not, how and where is their influence manifested? If so, what would be gained by their being more widely read today?) How are they important to your poetry?

Write specifically about at least two:

John Donne, Robert Herrick, Andrew Marvell, Thomas Traherne

3. Elizabeth Bishop has an accretive poem, in the manner of “This is the house that Jack built,” which seems atypical of her work as a whole. It ends...

This is the soldier home from the war. These are the years and the walls and the door that shut on a boy that pats the floor to see if the world is round or flat. This is a Jew in a newspaper hat that dances carefully down the ward, walking the plank of a coffin board with the crazy sailor that shows his watch that tells the time of the wretched man that lies in the house of bedlam.

She varies the penultimate line each time so that the “wretched man” starts out as the “tragic man,” becomes the “talkative man,” then the “honored man,” “the old, brave man,” next “the cranky man,” and so on. There are other changes as well—c. g., syntax.

Is there a way in which this seemingly atypical work really is like much of other Bishop?
Do you read it as an exercise poem (workshop poem)?
Discuss also seemingly atypical poems in Eliot or Levertov.

INFLUENCE, AFFILIATION, “MOVEMENTS,” COMPARISON & CONTRAST

INFLUENCE, AFFILIATION, “MOVEMENTS,” COMPARISON & CONTRAST

1. Scholars are divided on the question of whether the same person, whom we have come to call Homer, wrote both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*? What is your opinion? On what evidence do you base it?
2. Why has Joachim Du Belay been called a Petrarchanist? Compare the poetics of Du Belay with those of Petrarch.
3. Our language’s greatest poet inspires imitation (often by aspiring writers first thrashing around in poetry, often with regrettable results) and yet remains inimitable. Indeed, imitation of such characteristics of Shakespeare’s style as diction, rhetoric, prosody, or metaphoric strategy—may overwhelm the work of later writers, depriving it of subtlety and an authentic voice.

The writer on your list most obviously indebted to Shakespeare is Robert Browning. Discuss Browning and one other poet on your list in terms of their debts to Shakespeare. What did they learn from the Bard? How did they put it to use? Why did they succeed where others so often fail?

William Shakespeare, Robert Browning, one other poet

4. Both Blake and Höldenn can be considered as links (or transitional figures) between classical and Romantic poetry. Discuss both of these poets with regard to their historical contexts and their influence on later poetry.
5. Discuss the influence of William Blake on W. B. Yeats and Theodore Roethke. What elements of Blake’s thought and/or poetic practice were absorbed by the later writer? What elements appear to have been left behind? If the later writer has not merely derivative of Blake, why not?
6. Thomas Love Peacock, in a letter to Shelley, said, “If I live to the age of Methusalem and have uninterrupted literary leisure, I should not find time to read Keats’s “Hyperion.” What do you suppose he meant by that?

Among the poets on your list who have been strongly influenced by Keats, we find Williams, Levine, Plumly and Hass. Did they find time to read “Hyperion”? What qualities in Keats’s poetry attracted and influenced these poets? Where and how is that influence evident? Discuss Keats and any two of the following:

John Keats, William Carlos Williams, Philip Levine, Plumly and Robert Hass

7. Discuss "influence" in one of the following sets of poets:

- William Wordsworth, Walt Whitman, Wallace Stevens
- Walt Whitman, William Carlos Williams, Robert Creeley
- William Carlos Williams, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath
- Walt Whitman, Theodore Roethke, James Wright
- William Carlos Williams, Robert Lowell, Robert Creeley, Sylvia Plath
- Walt Whitman, William Carlos Williams, Allen Ginsberg
- Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, Frank O'Hara

8. Many of your minor authors were clearly influenced or mentored by your major authors. Please discuss one of the following examples of influence. Was the influence primarily one of technique, or content, or theme? Some other kind of influence? A combination? Trace specific elements from one author to the other. Why is this a matter of influence rather than imitation?

- William Blake and Allen Ginsberg
- William Blake and Galway Kinnell
- Walt Whitman and Allen Ginsberg
- Theodore Roethke and James Wright
- Elizabeth Bishop and Mark Strand

9. Your list includes a number of poets who formed close personal and literary friendships, conducted long correspondences and otherwise influenced each other. Please select one of the following pairs and discuss the ways in which they influenced, defined or informed each other's sensibility and work.

- Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop
- Charles Olson and Robert Creeley
- Robert Creeley and Denise Levertov
- Robert Bly and James Wright

10. Philip Levine has called Poe "The only American poet better in translation than in English." What do you suppose he means? Please trace Poe's influence, from the English-language originals into French and then back again into English.

11. Your list includes the two great 19th Century precursors of 20th Century American poetry, Whitman and Dickinson: poets who seem so antithetical that, if one were trying to create polar opposites, one could do worse than to dream up these mythic forces.

Or are they "opposites"? Do they stand in opposition to each other? Or are they perhaps—in the Blakean sense—"contraries"? Is Emerson relevant to this discussion?

Neither Whitman nor Dickinson had children (Whitman's claims notwithstanding). But they had heirs. Who are their heirs on your "Minor Authors" list? Choose two and discuss. Also, does any poet on your list show the influence of both Whitman and Dickinson?

12. A contemporary American poet has written a book which imagines something that never happened: a meeting between Walt Whitman and Gerard Manley Hopkins. How do you imagine such a meeting? Where and when does it take place—Brooklyn? Civil-War Washington? Camden? Oxford? Dublin? Purgatory? Heaven? What do they have in common? ‘Where do they differ? Be sure to discuss such matters as poetic innovation and strategy, social and spiritual vision, psychological daring and content (including repressed or expressed sexuality), and both the hope for and reality of the poetry which came after them.

13. Walt Whitman has exerted influence over poets of every continent, particularly those who want to celebrate the land and people of their birth and to affiliate themselves with democratic ideals. Discuss influence by and affinity with Whitman in Leopold Sedar Senghor and one other poet from your list. Be sure to ground your discussion in the poetry itself, and to include attention to formal and stylistic aspects of the work as well as its content.

14. Ezra Pound wrote a short poem called “The Pact,” which begins “I make a pact with you, Walt Whitman--/ I have detested you long enough...” Elizabeth Bishop wrote a longer poem called “Visits To St. Elizabeths,” about visiting Ezra Pound in that mental hospital. Both poems have been often quoted and anthologized.

Both Pound and Bishop express ambivalence toward their poetic forbearers—mixtures of gratitude, admiration, fellow-feeling, impatience, disillusionment, anger, contempt.. (the list might be continued). In each case, what does the later poet owe to the earlier? What tempers the gratitude and admiration? What moves the later poet to try to come to terms with his or her feelings by writing a poem?

15. T.S.Eliot once observed that trying to reach agreement with Ezra Pound was “like trying to see eye to eye with a cross-eyed man.” Yet Eliot and Pound remained loyal fiends throughout their lives. What were the aesthetic, cultural and social/political bases for this friendship? What debts did each poet have to the other? Did their careers as poets diverge or remain contiguous? What were the long-term influences of each poet?

16. It is a critical commonplace that William Carlos Williams and T.S. Eliot had distinctly different poetics and influenced different strains in American verse. Indeed, in his autobiography Williams wrote that publication of *The Waste Land* “wiped out our world as if an atom bomb had been dropped upon it” and delayed by twenty years the acceptance of Williams’s own poetic values. Yet despite all their obvious differences, both men were early reviewers and ardent admirers of the poetry of Marianne Moore. How can you account for this fact? With what aspects of Moore’s work did each man sympathize—and not? What broad characteristics (or common ground) of Modernism might be suggested by the confluence of these poets?

17. On a talk for the BBC in 1937, W.B. Yeats admitted that T.S. Eliot was currently the most influential figure on the scene. “We older poets disliked this poetry [e.g. Eliot’s and his followers],” Yeats said, “but had to admit its satiric power.” Is Yeats misreading Eliot (note that *Four Quartets* had not yet been published)? What does Yeats’s poetry have that Eliot’s lacks? Do you see this as a defect? If it isn’t a defect—merely a difference—how can poetry as a whole be judged?

18. In “Coole Park and Bally Lee” Yeats asserts, “We were the last romantics,” and goes on to describe, in terms of utmost magnificence, the high style to which he and his peers aspired. What are the principal characteristics of this style in both Shelley and Yeats? Is it primarily a matter of diction or are other devices and techniques at work?

Then: Is it feasible to write, in 1994, in the high style of Yeats and Shelley? Is there any one poet on your list who might be said to approach...

What have I dared? where am I lifted? how
Shall I descend, and perish not? I know
That Love makes all things equal: I have heard
By mine own heart this joyous truth averred:
The spirit of the worm beneath the sod
In love and worship, blends itself with God.
(from “Epipsychidion”)

or has high style been replaced with dandyism?

19. Is it Yeats vs. Auden or Yeats and Auden? Focus on these two in the way which is most meaningful to you.

20. W.H. Auden has suggested that one difference between a major poet and a minor one is that the former develops over the course of time so that his later work is noticeably different, and probably in some ways superior to, his earlier—Yeats is the most obvious example from your list; on the other hand, a minor poet’s work, however exquisite, remains consistent over the course of his lifetime—e.g., A.E. Housman, John Crowe Ransom.

Do you accept or reject Auden’s criterion? In your list of major authors, at least three poets appear not to meet it: Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, and Marianne Moore (some would argue for or against others). What is so extremely valuable about the work of these three that makes their work “major” to you? Conversely, what is it about the work of James Dickey and Sylvia Plath, who did evolve in Auden’s sense, that makes their poetry for you the work of a “minor” or less important poet? In asking this question we are not, of course, disputing your choices; we’re trying to find out how you feel about and what you respond to in the poetry of the writers you have selected.

21. During the Nazi occupation of Warsaw, Czeslaw Milosz was once pinned down by machine gun fire with a borrowed copy of *The Waste Land* in his pocket. Fifteen years earlier, in Burma, the depressed and exiled Pablo Neruda had written the first book of *Residencia en la tierra* under the influence of the same book, as well as of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” Discuss Eliot’s influence on these two major poets. How does their early work reflect Eliot’s language and concerns? How does their later development follow, parallel, or diverge from Eliot’s career?

22. Andre Breton, in his first manifesto of Surrealism, recommended that the mind should be liberated from logic and reason. In his second manifesto, he claimed that the surrealist idea was to revitalize the psychic forces by a ‘vertiginous descent’ into the self in quest of that secret and hidden territory where all the apparently contradictory in our everyday lives and consciousness ‘will be made plain. Andre Breton and Robert Desnos were both members of the original group of Surrealists; other poets from your list, such as James Tate and Charles Simic, have been influenced by the movement. Please discuss Surrealism, and elaborate on its poetic practices and continuing influence.

23. Pablo Neruda is arguably the most influential poet of the Twentieth Century in any language. What this influence means, however, is complicated by the diversity of styles and manners in which he wrote. Poets on your list who at one time or another have claimed or demonstrated influence by Neruda include Federico Garcia Lorca, Elizabeth Bishop, Cesar Vallejo, Denise Levertov, Robert Bly, Philip Levine, Mark Strand, and probably others. Choosing two of the poets just listed, discuss the aspects or phases of Neruda’s career with which each was in sympathy. Consider such questions as diction, imagery, and rhetoric, as well as content.

Federico Garcia Lorca, Elizabeth Bishop, Cesar Vallejo, Denise Levertov, Robert Bly, Philip Levine, Mark Strand

24. In 1959 critic Anna Balakian suggested that neither Dada nor surrealism had made an impact on American literature, in part because America had not experienced the violence and destruction of World War I and World War II in the same way that Europe had experienced it. Returning to the subject in 1969, Balakian said:

“my observations and references support the impression that the American poet of the last two or three decades has neither imitated surrealist writing nor appropriated its spirit of cosmic adventure....If the pulse of American poetry has changed at all, it has done so since Vietnam... .The virulent reaction to the total futility of violence and rejection of the society that allowed war produced in Europe the spirit of Dada during World War I. This spirit is much more evident in America now than that of surrealism. It is after destruction that renovation generally comes, and it is destruction that the young are cultivating as they repudiate all that their elders stand for. Will they also repudiate the language of that society based on logic? Will they create a new language?”

Your MFA list includes numerous surrealist poets as well as poets often discussed in relation to Dada and surrealism. Those writing prior to the 1960s are not American, and those writing from the late 1960s to the present are all American. Discuss the relation between violence, spiritual upheaval, rebellion and “cosmic adventure” in three of the poets listed below.

Pablo Neruda, Cesar Vallejo, Antonio Machado, Robert Bly, Philip Levine, Mark Strand, Russell Edson, James Tate

25. It has been said of Czeslaw Milosz that the speaker of his poems seems to be suffering the calamities and catastrophes of the 20th Century all alone, that he is the voice not of one man but of his century. Similar statements have been made about the work of Yehuda Amichai. Do you agree with this view of their poetic personae? Discuss the work of these two poets in these terms. Though biography or world view may bear on your answer, be sure to ground your discussion in the poetry itself.

26. Lowell and Bishop knew each other well and influenced each other's work. Discuss how this influence manifested in a moral sense in both their poetries.

27. Discuss the influence of William Carlos Williams on Robert Creeley and Robert Lowell. What elements of Williams's thought and/or poetic practice were absorbed by the later writer? What elements appear to have been left behind? If the later writer was not merely derivative of Williams, why not?

28. Stanley Kunitz worked extremely closely with Theodore Roethke on many of Roethke's poems and, indeed, claims that some of Roethke's best known lines are the result of his suggestions and editing. Roethke has left us only one sustained critical essay on another poet, and that is on Louise Bogan. What connections do you see between these three near-contemporaries?

29. A number of the poets on your list—Kenneth Patchen, Gregory Corso, Lawrence Ferlinghetti—are frequently associated with major revolutions in American poetry and were widely read and discussed in the 1950s and 1960s. Today it would be fairly rare to hear these poets' names in literary conversations or to encounter an MFA student who is enthusiastically reading them. How do you account for this change? To what extent is the change a reflection of the changed expectations for poetry? To what extent a criticism of the poet's work? To what extent just a whim of fashion?

30. A number of poets historically associated with the project of Surrealism have been included in your study of the poets of witness. How is the idea of poetry of witness possible within avant-garde poetics? Discuss this problem in the work of any two of these poets:

Charles Simic, André Breton, Robert Desnos, Tristan Tzara, Guillaume Apollinaire, Benjamin Péret.

31. There are obvious ways in which many of the poets on your list might be paired. Choose one of the following pairs and discuss the linkages between these poets, in terms of the form and content of their work.

- Richard Hugo and Gerald Stern
- Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath
- Philip Levine and Edward Hirsch
- E.E. Cummings and William Carlos Williams
- Walt Whitman and Allen Ginsberg
- Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath
- Robert Bly and James Wright

31.a. Certain poets on your list could be paired for various reasons. Choose one of the pairings below and discuss the ways in which these two poets might be linked in terms of form, content, literary friendship or some other criterion.

- Adrienne Rich and Emily Dickinson
- Philip Levine and Sharon Olds
- Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell
- Sappho and HD.
- James Tate and Charles Simic
- James Wright and W.S. Merwin
- John Ashbery and James Tate

31.b. Certain poets on your list have developed strong literary friendships with others on your list. Others have been particularly interested in one of their predecessors. Choosing one pair of poets, please discuss what you know of the relationship between their work and their ideas, as well as their mutual influence.

...see the next page for pairs of poets

...31.b. pairs of poets

- Robert Hass and Louise Gluck
- Philip Levine and Sharon Olds
- Emily Dickinson and Adrienne Rich
- James Wright and Robert Bly
- Galway Kinnell and Sharon Olds

32. In 1913, Ezra Pound wrote: "For the best part of a thousand years English poets have gone to school to the French, or one might as well say that there never were any English poets until they began to study the French. The history of English poetic glory is a history of successful steals from the French..." Whether you agree with this assessment or not, your list reflects an interest in both anglophone and francophone poetic traditions. Please discuss (or answer) one of the following: 1) Why might Charles Baudelaire be called "the father of contemporary free verse poetry"? 2) In what ways do we read the influence of French poets in the work of T.S. Eliot? 3) Why do you suppose Edgar Allen Poe was so widely read and admired in France?

33. Why has Joachim Du Bellay been called a Petrarchanist? Compare the poetics of Du Bellay with those of Petrarch.

34. Several of your poets were associated or identified with the "Black Mountain" school. What was "Black Mountain," and what was the aesthetic project of its poets? How did William Carlos Williams react to the publication of "The Wasteland"? It is sometimes said that twentieth-century American poetry diverged into two currents with the appearance of Eliot's poem— one tradition flowing from Williams, the other from Eliot. How would you contrast these two, if indeed you do agree with this assessment?

INFLUENCE, AFFILIATION, "MOVEMENTS," COMPARISON & CONTRAST

CONFESSONAL POETRY

1. The meaning of the expression "confessional poetry" began to be debated and qualified almost as soon as the expression was introduced. What is "confessional poetry"? What were the strengths and weaknesses of that poetry when it first appeared? What are strengths and weaknesses of more recent work in that mode? Focus your answer on any two of the following poets:

Robert Lowell, Theodore Roethke, Anne Sexton, Allen Ginsberg, Sylvia Plath

2. Several of the poets on your list are routinely described as "confessional" poets. Using the work of any three poets on your list, show us how the label "confessional" is either useful or inadequate.

3. Confessional poetry was a liberating influence on many American poets who felt too restricted by the demands of late modernism. Other poets, however, have reacted against the excesses of poetry centered on the "I" and against psychological models for the poem. Choosing two of the poets listed below, discuss how each plotted a course between modernism and confession. What voices has each chosen? What prosodies? What concepts, psychological and otherwise, of the poem's purpose?

Galway Kinnell, Gary Snyder, Mark Strand, Robert Bly, James Wright, Frank O'Hara, Robert Creeley.

4. Much confessional poetry draws its power from the use of raw personal experience. But your list also includes poets noted for their very restrained use of autobiographical content. Using four of the poets listed below, contrast these two attitudes toward content. Consider such questions as the following: How do the "confessionals" transcend the personal, immediate and sensational in order to address questions of larger thematic significance? (Or do they?) How do the more restrained poets sublimate raw personal material into their poems? (Or do they?) How are these attitudes toward poetic content reflected in the poetic styles of the poets? What are the satisfactions of each kind of poetry?

Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, W.H. Auden, Elizabeth Bishop, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Sharon Olds

INFLUENCE, AFFILIATION, “MOVEMENTS,” COMPARISON & CONTRAST

LANGUAGE

1. Language in poetry can be said to move on a scale from the colloquial-transparent to the highly decorative, self-conscious, where language is calling as much attention to itself as possible. Discuss the poetic language of two of the following poets in those terms, particularly in relation to the experience, perceptions, and reflections with which they deal.

Wallace Stevens, Elizabeth Bishop, James Wright, Stanley Kunitz

1.a. Language in poetry can be said to move on a scale from the colloquial-transparent to the highly decorative, self-conscious, where language is calling as much attention to itself as possible. Discuss the poetic language of two of the following poets in terms of the “scale”: from colloquial-transparent to self-conscious, particularly in relation to the experience, perceptions, and reflections with which they deal.

Especially as we move toward the present, your list seems to be dominated by the colloquial. Do you agree with this statement? If so, how do you account for this tendency in your interests? If not, why don't you agree?

John Donne, William Wordsworth, John Keats, William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, James Wright, Sylvia Plath, Robert Creeley, Amiri Baraka

2. Of the poets on your list, which would you say comes closest to being a “public poet,” i.e., one who writes of experiences she or he can reasonably expect readers to share? Which seems to you the most arcane?--i.e., to write of experiences never shared by anyone else? Compare the attitudes toward language in both poets. Finally, does the rather high number or arcane poets on your list explain the absence of your list of poets who write satire or social satire? Of highly accessible feminist poets? Why?

3. Traditionally, poets have placed high confidence in the powers of language to elevate, restore, instruct, and even redeem us in moments of trial and torment. In this century that trust has been fractured as never before. While some poets have labored to restore their faith others have enacted and elaborated break-down, seeking through the dissection of language a truer existential alignment with the universe. In a few poets both tendencies have been manifest. Discuss these issues in the work of the two of the following poets:

W.S. Merwin, Cesar Vallejo, Czeslaw Milosz, Charles Olson, Galway Kinnell

4. Several of the poets on your list are united by their desire to subvert the official rhetoric of regimes under which they have lived and worked. They have worked in “unofficial schools” of linguistic resistance, employing ambiguity, irony, and difficult imagery to escape both the censors and the prescribers of language. Discuss the work of both Dao and Zbigniew Herbert in these terms. Be sure to ground your discussion in the poetry itself, and to include attention to formal aspects of the poetry as well as its content.

5. Discuss precision, restraint and passion in three of the following poets. What qualities of inner and outer observation, understatement or passionate utterance, and depth of emotion distinguish the work of each poet? Were the poets influenced by each other? If so, how?

John Keats, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, James Wright, Stanley Plumly, Margaret Atwood

INFLUENCE, AFFILIATION, “MOVEMENTS,” COMPARISON & CONTRAST

TRANSLATION

1. Poetry in English has always interacted, via translation, with poetry of other languages. In this century, translators have worked in languages as diverse as Chinese and Urdu, as well as in the more closely related literatures of Europe and South America. Discuss the influence of translation on two of the writers listed below. Consider the affects both on form and style (use of line, metaphor, speaking voice, etc.) and on the concept of the poet's role, purpose, and proper subjects.

Wallace Stevens, Gary Snyder, Mark Strand, James Wright, Robert Bly, Robert Lowell

2. The charge is frequently made that a great deal of contemporary American poetry reads as if it were in translation—William Matthews made such observations as early as the mid 1970's, and Gregory Orr has recently made it about his own early work.

Your list contains an unusually high number of poets who did not write in English. Have you read them in the original? in translation? both? What can a poet learn by reading poetry in another language? in translation? What can a poet only learn by reading work originally written in his or her own language? Discuss at least two poets on your list.

3. Referring to bilingual editions of poetry, Ben Bellitt has said “The binder’s seam is there to remind us that the translation of poetry is not a systematic plagiarism of the original, under cover of a second language: it is an act of imagination forced upon one by the impossibility of..Jiteral transference...and by the autonomy of the poetic process.” Others have criticized translators of Bellitt’s ilk for asserting too much of their own “autonomy” and neglecting that of the original text.

Choosing authors whom you have also read in the original, identify the qualities and the inevitable limitations of a translation you have read that you would call successful. What sensibilities of the writer you read in both original and translation are the easiest to capture in English? Which most difficult? How does the different nature of English and the second language affect this situation?

4. Keeping in mind issues raised by the above question, discuss the influence of non-English-language poetries on one poet on your list. Discuss the influence of non-English-language poetries on your work. Finally, consider the overall consequences of poetry in translation for current American poetry.

5. If you read Greek, Latin, or German, describe what is retained and what gets lost in the translation of Sappho, Catuflus, or Rilke. Then take one to four lines of another poet on your list, translate them into Greek, Latin, or German, and explain what gets lost and what is retained.

6. You have been asked to produce a new translation of one of the poets listed below. Assuming (quite fantastically!) that you know the original languages of all of them, which would you choose to re-translate and why? You might include in your discussion your aesthetic and formal affinity with the poet’s work, the quality of existing translations, and your ideas about the art of translation.

Homer, Matsuo Basho, Pablo Neruda, Leopold Senghor, Czeslaw Milosz, Zbigniew Herbert, Rosario Castellanos, Bei Dao, Siphon Sepamla

INFLUENCE, AFFILIATION, “MOVEMENTS,” COMPARISON & CONTRAST

HUMOR

1. A great many readers of poetry—and indeed, many poets—sneer at “funny poems” and lose interest as soon as a poet is associated with humor. And yet when James Wright was asked what role humor played in his writing, he said, “I could not do without it” Discuss the role of humor in three of the poets below. To what extent and in what ways do they employ humor? How do the poets combine humor and seriousness of purpose?

Catullus, John Donne, Robert Browning, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, T S. Eliot, Marianne Moore, E.E. Cummings, Langston Hughes, Dylan Thomas, Stevie Smith, Theodore Roethke, Richard Wilbur, Gwendolyn Brooks, William Stafford, James Wright, X. J. Kennedy, Elizabeth Bishop, Gary Snyder, W.S. Merwin, Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath, Mark Strand, Russell Edson, Margaret Atwood, James Tate, Lucille Clifton, Heather McHugh

2. Daniel Hoffman has said, “Light verse, based on shared norms of conduct and of versification, has not fared well as the century advances. The impulses toward the breakup of established forms and poetry of personal revelation mitigate against this.” Hoffman’s statement seems to imply that poets who write light verse will be aesthetically, socially, and politically conservative. Defend, refute, or modify that implication by discussing the light verse of three of the following poets. Feel free to refer to your poets’ serious poetry for further evidence.

Ogden Nash, W.H. Auden, Theodore Roethke, George Starbuck

INFLUENCE, AFFILIATION, “MOVEMENTS,” COMPARISON & CONTRAST

QUESTIONING THE LIST ITSELF

1. Your list contains no writers who were alive before the year 1800. Why? What qualities do Nineteenth and Twentieth Century writers possess that their predecessors do not that makes it more possible for you to connect meaningfully to their work?

2. Please explain how an MFA reading list can include William Carlos Williams, H.D., T.S. Eliot, and Marianne Moore, but omit Ezra Pound. How is Pound a—perhaps the—crucial link between them?

3. You have submitted an admirable MFA reading list—solid, balanced, interesting. We approved it, right? But in addition to our interest in the list itself; we are also interested in the apparent gaps or lacunae it contains. Here are a few examples:

- a.) You include John Donne but you do not include T.S.Eliot, the poet who caused a major reevaluation of Donne and other Metaphysical Poets and thereby determined the course of much (perhaps most) 20th Century American poetry for about 40 years.
- b.) You include Baudelaire but (again) omit Eliot, whose early and influential work has Baudelaire written all over it.
- c.) You include Whitman, Williams, Creeley and Duncan, but you omit the important link between the first two and last two, Charles Olson.
- d.) You include Williams and H.D., but not Ezra Pound—who was a friend of both when they were all college students in Pennsylvania, who was briefly engaged to H.D., who fought a duel—with walking canes!--with Williams over H.D.'s affections, who created Imagism partly to promote H.D.'s poetry, and who was a life-long friend of Dr. Paterson.
- e.) You include Blake and Yeats, but you omit the American poet most obviously influenced by both of them, Theodore Roethke, and you omit the poet most famously influenced by Blake, Allen Ginsberg.

Please choose one of these omissions/examples and 1.) demonstrate that you know what you've left out and 2.) justify your list in terms of what you include.

4. American poetry from the early 50s until the mid 70s is conventionally discussed in terms of five to seven “movements,” of which the most frequently cited are Beat, Black, Black Mountain (or Projective Verse), Confessional, Deep Image, Formalist (i.e., the persistence of rhyme and meter), and New York School. Which movements are represented on your list, and why? Which movements are not represented on your list, and why? Be sure to characterize the movements which are represented on your reading list.

5. You are being interviewed for a teaching position at a leading university. Members of the hiring committee are highly impressed by your own creative work, but some of them are concerned that your reading background may be too narrow to prepare you for the courses they expect you to teach, which include both introductory and advanced reading in Twentieth Century poetry. It is their belief that one of the defining characteristics of poetry in this century has been not only the expansion of literary opportunity but the brilliant achievement of women and non-whites. Therefore, these courses are expected to include them, not just as token presences studied in relation to white male norms, but as full and original contributors to our literature. How do you answer their concerns?

5.a. You are being interviewed for a teaching position at a leading university. Members of the hiring committee are highly impressed by your own creative work, but some of them are concerned that your reading background may be too narrow to prepare you for the courses they expect you to teach, which include both introductory and advanced reading in Twentieth Century poetry. Specifically, they are concerned about your ability to teach the great American modernist poets (such as Eliot, Pound, Stevens, Moore, H.D.) and many of the poets who influenced them (such as Sappho, Dante, the Troubadours, Donne, Baudelaire, Browning, and the Pre-Raphaelites).

These faculty members are not dinosaurs: they agree that one of the defining characteristics of poetry in this century has been the expansion of literary opportunity and the brilliant achievement of women and non-whites. They are concerned, however, that students also read and understand great pre-Twentieth Century European poetry, great poetry of their own linguistic tradition, and major American poetry of the first half of the Twentieth Century—poetry which, for better or worse, was mainly written by white males. How do you answer their concerns?

Please note: Use your list as a whole, making detailed connections between three poets on your list and at least three not on your list.

6. A member of your exam committee has made the following request “I’ve not read Ted Kooser or Roger Weingarten. Introduce their work to me in such a way that I want to read it.”

RELATION OF LIST TO STUDENT'S OWN WRITING

RELATION OF LIST TO STUDENT'S OWN WRITING

1. Your list is entrancing because it includes poets willing to indulge feelings (Rilke, Louys, Housman, Wilde (as poet), and simultaneously poets who stand back from emotion to examine it (Dryden, Pushkin, Eliot, Auden, Seth). Do you accept this broad opposition? What makes the sentimentality of Housman and Louys acceptable? Is there any significance that both these extremes are represented by poets closer to being formalist than others on your list?
2. Your list is also entrancing because it contains names not now in high academic fashion: e.g., Dryden, Poe, Masters, Rupert Brooke. What is lost to academe by excluding these poets from primary status in the canon? What attracts you to them? Do you see any commonality between Dryden, Poe, Masters and Brooke, other than their current exclusion by academics?
3. Your thesis proposal tells us that your poems focus on the body and on how it relates to the "idea of location." Elizabeth Bishop's poetry is concerned with a different, but related, "idea of location." Lucille Clifton's poetry may also be described as concerned with questions of embodiment and location. Distinguish your use of the "body" and of "location" from Bishop's and Clifton's uses of these concepts.
4. We are intrigued by your listing Edgar Lee Masters. Discuss why you value his poetry, how he works in relation to other poets on your list, and what his impact (if any) on your work is. Develop your answer by means of detailed references to specific poems (yours and his).
5. To those of us who know that your PhD. dissertation was to have been on Alexander Pope, it is interesting and surprising to find Pope—and all neo-classical poets—excluded from your list.

If you omitted such poets as Pope and Swift simply because you already knew too much about them—because demonstrating that knowledge would be too easy—ignore this question.

If, on the other hand, these omissions represent an aesthetic judgment, discuss the evolution of your poetic education, both as reader and writer, with reference to neo-classicism and the kinds of poetry which supplanted it. What initially attracted you to Eighteenth Century poetry? What changed in you or for you? If you were teaching MFA students, what role would such poetries have in the studies you recommended to them?

6. We know that Allen Grossman has been an important influence on both your own poetry and on your decision to pursue "a literary life." Please discuss the specific ways in which Grossman and Grossman's poetry have mattered to you. Does his work provide something which is unavailable elsewhere in contemporary poetry?

Since no one influence is sufficient for a poet's development, and since too great a dependence on one model may result in work which is derivative, which one other poet on your list do you consider most antithetical, or contrary, or complementary to Grossman's influence. Please refer to specific poems by Grossman, the other poet, and by you.

Please note: Be sure to give balanced attention to both form and content.

7. No one among any of our acquaintances, we imagine, believes in gyres and two thousand year cycles of history, nor are local shopping malls filled with devotees of Urizen. To what extent does the private symbolism of Blake and Yeats alienate a reader? Is that alienation worth it for the poetry? Answer this question from the perspective of William Carlos Williams' and from your own perspective.
8. Why Gertrude Stein? Is Gertrude Stein a dead end? Is Gertrude Stein a poet? What makes Gertrude Stein a poet? What makes Gertrude Stein a poet? Is Gertrude Stein a poet? Is Gertrude Stein a dead end? Why Gertrude Stein?
9. A characteristic of your list is that it features largely poets of the middle emotional range beside a few of the extremes: Robert Frost versus Dylan Thomas, Elizabeth Bishop versus John Betryman. If you had to pick one side or the other—the middle range or the extreme, which would you say has influenced your writing more? How does one side look at the other?
10. What is it about E.E. Cummings? Be specific.

11. **Warning:** *This is sort of a gratuitous, unanswerable question, but the student may not get the “game” here.*

Respond to the following statement by Gerald Stern in his essay “Becoming a Poet” (1988). Please be specific.

“Possibly because the language belongs to us all, and the writer uses language as his medium of expression, it is unconsciously, and sometimes deliberately, assumed that one does not need training [Nonetheless] there are now dozens of graduate and undergraduate writing programs. There is even an organization, the Associated Writing Programs, to tie threads together. And maybe young people, and old, will soon go to the university to study ‘writing,’ just as they do ‘art’ and ‘music’ and ‘dance’ and ‘acting.’”

Why is there a difference? Is there a difference? Doesn’t the very word “poet” have unusual, even painful, connotations? What is it to be a poet? What—if anything—is the difference between being a poet and writing poetry, or writing verse? What does a poet do? Is it a lifetime activity like being a musician, or a linguist, or an accountant? That is, is it a profession? Mustn’t the poet speak out for the whole culture, the whole race, in one way or another? Isn’t that an absurd demand, and doesn’t it create uneasiness rather than humility? Isn’t that the reason the young writer either hides or exaggerates his craft, his art? Isn’t that the reason he is humiliated or ignored? Is our culture doomed to be anti-poetic forever? Is there something wrong with the culture—or with poetry?”

12. MFA candidates are sometimes permitted one or two quirky, idiosyncratic poets on their exam lists—for example, novelists such as James Joyce (who wrote a modest number of poems), or rock poets such as Bob Dylan or Leonard Cohen, or popular poets such as Ogden Nash. Nonetheless, we are curious about your desire to include James Whitcomb Riley and Joseph Seamon Cotter. Neither poet, for example, is included in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, or Hyatt Waggoner’s massive critical survey, *American Poets from the Puritans to the Present*. Riley is represented by four old chestnuts (“The Old Swimmin’-Hole,” “The Days Gone By,” “When the Frost is on the Punkin,” and “Little Orphan Annie”) in the roughly 2000 pages of *The Library of America’s American Poetry of the Nineteenth Century*, and—under the category “Popular Entertainers and Newspaper Poets”—he receives two pages (out of roughly 1200) in David Perkins’s *A History of American Poetry*. Cotter is not mentioned in either of these two-volume books.

Are these serious mistakes of editorial and critical judgment? Are these two poets due for reevaluation and rediscovery? Why? Would you recommend that other MFA students study the poems of Riley and Cotter as part of their development as poets? For what qualities? Or, are Riley and Cotter essentially light-weight, sentimental poets who happen to have been important in their development? How important?

13. Jazz, Blues, Rhythm & Blues—and the overall cultural surround in which these musical traditions exist—are clearly important in your own poetry and the poetry you read. Discuss the relationship between music, music cultures, the music of language, and poetry in any three poems on your list. Whenever possible, refer to specific musicians, compositions, instruments, performance settings, and poems. Finally, discuss how you have put these experiences to work in your own poems.

RELATION OF LIST TO STUDENT’S OWN WRITING

TEACHING

1. You are designing an “Introduction to Poetry Writing” course which includes reading assignments. You have decided to emphasize the influence of earlier writers on contemporary poets. Which four to six writers on your list will you use? What poems will you assign? What lines of influence will you emphasize?
2. You are designing a junior-level reading course in Twentieth Century Poetry based entirely on your MFA list. Which authors will you cover and why?
3. You are designing a course in contemporary women’s literature and have room for three books of poetry by women. Which three women on your MFA list will you include, which specific books, and why? Be sure you consider all the aspects of women’s experience the books convey and the direction in women’s poetry the books represent. (Perhaps you feel other work by the three women should also be introduced: what earlier or later poems will you duplicate and distribute to supplement the three books?)

4. You are designing an undergraduate course in gay and lesbian literature and want to spend about a month on poetry. What will be the focus of this part of the course? Which poets on your list will you include? In what order? How will you approach each author? Be sure to discuss specific works as well as general characteristics in each poet. And remember that some students—perhaps many—will not have read much poetry or know how to read a poem.

5. You've been offered a teaching job at a high security women's prison. Your students will be prisoners and prison staff (guards, etc.). Design an introductory course in poetry that would be appropriate for that student population. Write a brief course description, and—as if this were the first day of class—list the four to six poets whose work you plan to focus on. Tell us something about each of the poet's work and why we are studying it.

You may replace this population with any other particular population, such as a high security men's prison, a law office, an economics department, a convent or a monastery.

Please note: Because of the number of poets you must cover, 2 of the poets selected may be discussed—at greater length and in other contexts—elsewhere in your exam.

RELATION OF LIST TO STUDENT'S OWN WRITING

RIVALRIES/JUDGING

1. Robert Frost and Wallace Stevens knew each other, and maintained a friendly but complex rivalry throughout their acquaintanceship. On a trip to Florida, Frost, jocularly nasty, called Wallace Stevens' poetry "bric a brac." Stevens, in an essay deeply skeptical of Frost's methods and themes, adopted a dry, mocking tone; Frost's poems, wrote Stevens, "are said to be full of humanity."

Create a dialogue between these two men in which each objects to the poetry of the other and defends his own against his rival's charges; in the course of this dialogue, have each man embellish his defense by referring to the work of contemporary poets sympathetic or antithetical, as the case may be, to the values under consideration.

2. Gregory Orr and Mary Oliver have been nominated for entry into the Literary Hall of Fame. A panel has been assembled to consider their qualifications and consists of Emily Dickinson, W.B. Yeats and Robert Frost. Choose either Orr or Oliver and describe the panel's deliberations. Who will speak for the younger poet? Who will speak against? Will the nominee make it?

2.a. Roger Weingarten and Ted Kooser have been nominated for entry into the Literary Hall of Fame. A panel has been assembled to consider their qualifications and consists of Donne, Moore and Olson. Choose either Graham or Hirsch and describe the panel's deliberations. Who will speak for the younger poet? Who will speak against? Will the nominee make it?

3. Sappho and Stevie Smith run into each other at a bar crowded with both straights and gays and immediately find that they are both poets. Great friendship develops—but they break into a violent argument because _____. Detail the course of their argument. Is it a draw? Or does one of them win? Why?

4. Edgar Lee Masters and Wallace Stevens are on their way to a reception for Robert Creeley in the English Department lounge in Robinson Hall—and are delayed for thirty minutes when the elevator breaks down. Although they've only just met, Masters and Stevens hardly notice the passage of time—such is the animation of conversation in that dark container. What do they talk about? Make detailed reference to the poems, aesthetic theories and poetic agendas of the three poets. Do they part as friends? Do they both go on to the reception when the maintenance crew releases them?

RELATION OF LIST TO STUDENT'S OWN WRITING

PERFORMANCE

1. Pretend that you are at a reading of the works of any two poets on your list. (The poets, themselves, may or may not be present and reading their own works.) What difference does it make to your sense and understanding of each of these poets' work to hear it aloud? How does the performance of this work influence your own poetry, both on the page and when you read it aloud?

RELATION OF LIST TO STUDENT'S OWN WRITING

— CRITICAL RECEPTION —

1. Several poets on your list have been marginalized, critically ignored, or excluded from literary anthologies and canons. Choose two of these poets, and discuss the history of reception to their work, as well as the reasons why their work is of importance to you.

Louise Labe, Christina Rossetti, Mira Loy, Lorine Niedecker

RELATION OF LIST TO STUDENT'S OWN WRITING

— PARTYING —

1. You have started a small poetry salon (or workshop) and invited some of the poets on your list. You hope this group will continue to meet at weekly or monthly intervals to socialize, discuss current literary issues, and critique each others' poems. Which poets on your list did you invite, and why? Now that they have all anived, been introduced to each other, exchanged some chit-chat and handed around copies of their poems, you find your poem is the first to be discussed. (Provide a copy of one of your poems in your answer.) What do the assembled poets have to say about it? How do they respond to each otherus comments? Has the salon gotten off to a good start?