English 18: 2300 Study Topics for Six Authors Inst.: Beecher

A Few Study Questions on **Spenser**, **Milton**, **Jonson**, **Shakespeare**, **Marlowe** and **Gawain**. And some notes on **How to Write a good Term Paper**.

(These might be turned into term paper topics by converting them into themes or theses. Note that a list of topics is good for study, but that a term paper must set up an argument to be debated according to critical methods and problematic investigation. A good paper will not only build upon an informed background, but will look at qualities of data, whether from the text itself, or from the critical writing around that text, according to the principles of logic, inference, and computation. The final product is some form of argument, interpretation, or hermeneutic evaluation through close reading, comparison, or contextualization. A good term paper identifies ambiguities, indeterminacies, equivocations, and directs the reader toward answers. For the purposes of this course, any significant question about the works under investigation, how they communicate, what their conventions imply, how they appeal to audiences or readers then and now, how their media influence their messages, is appropriate; topics need not be chosen from the following).

SPENSER

1. Spenser adopts an allegorical method of story-telling. What are its characteristics and conventions? What reading strategies are necessary to ferret out all its meanings?
2. Why does he place the Garden of Adonis at the centre of the book? This is emblematic in the extreme, but of what? What does Spenser understand through mythology of the archetypes concerning the cyclic designs of the universe, and their influences upon human beliefs?
3. What does the Hellenore episode represent within the overall "essay" on chastity represented in Book III? Why is it an essential foil to the main topic?
4. Who is Busyrane, what is meant by his abduction and torment of Amoret, and why is Britomart the only person able to save her? What is revealed about the nature and processes of love, or erotic desire, by the Triumph of Cupid?
5. Britomart is an allegorized character, acting nearly always in conjunction with her essence. But there are moments in which Spenser indulges in a more humanly vulnerable and personal profiling of her. What are some of those moments and how do they alter the nature of the allegorical design?
6. The *Faerie Queene* is a conduct book, one designed to teach all virtue and caution against all vice category-by-category through examples. How does that pedagogical design work, and how is the whole of the book set up to teach and fix these precepts? What is the relation of exemplum to admonition?
7. Describe some of the levels of "reality" that are represented in this work and how they work together in a synchronological way: myth, contemporary England, fairyland, ancient times, Authurian times, pastoral time. Arguably there are

others. Why is this impossible imaginary place maintained in such a fluid and indistinct way, and how can it be so descriptively rich at the same time?

8. Who is King Arthur, and what does he represent to the poem? What is he looking for, and how is he interwoven into the action?

MILTON

9. Milton's *Paradise Lost* is a vast epic poem, influenced most directly by Virgil. What are some of the structural features that link them. How are they also entirely different as epic visionaries.
10. How complex is the time sequence represented by this poem? It begins *in medias res*, in the middle of things, then works forward, and ultimately backwards in time, leading up to the emergence of human time and the narrative sequence of the fall, before opening upon a vast visionary history of future time. What is this order, and why is the historical profile so important?
11. Milton is concerned with a great argument, namely of justifying the ways of God to man. Why is that necessary? What are some of the terms of the argument? What are some of the means?
12. Adam also receives an education during the course of the poem. Why does Milton include this episode, and how does it relate to the mind set that pertains to temptation on Adam's part? Against what does the angel caution him?
13. Who is responsible for the fall of humankind? Does Milton debunk some of the "he said, she said" polarizing of the blame? How and why does he do this?
14. What are epic similes, and why are they so important to Milton as a descriptive device, and as a guide to the imagination?
15. What is "injured merit," who suffers from it, and how did this state of sin come about?
16. How does Milton handle the problem of fallen man before the fall, on the assumption that one must know and understand evil in order to know how to refrain from it? How critical is Eve's erotic dream, and Adam's explanation of it?
17. In what consists the few rare moments of allegory in the poem, and why did Milton break out of his initial mimetic mode to create Sin and Death? Were they necessary to his great design?
18. Milton makes sin the great dividing line in human history, the pre- and post-fallen states. What does this story illustrate about the human condition, and why is it the central myth upon which the Judeo-Christian belief system is built? What does Milton think about the destiny of sin, man's generic condition, and the burden of original sin?
19. What is Milton's attitude toward pre-fallen sexuality? Is his positive embracing and defence of innocent mutual human sexuality rather a surprise in the context of this judgemental poem? What are his views of ideal married love?
20. Would it be possible to describe the major preoccupations of *Paradise Lost* in terms of intellectual history, or the history of ideas? How do ideas have history, and how are they modified by subsequent thinkers? What are the main Miltonic ideas, and how is *P. L.* a "thinking poem?"
21. Is there anything at all to the argument that Satan must be the hero of the poem because of his dynamic presence as a wounded and suffering protagonist? Can

Milton have intended that? How can Christ be considered the hero, even though he plays a short role? Is it a heroic poem?

22. How does Milton mark the phases of Satan's career, and does he invent forms of punishment for him through a long slow degradation from a radiant angel to a crawling serpent hissing and eating ashes?

MARLOWE

23. Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* is the story of a brilliant professor who is tempted by power through a corrupt use of his knowledge. What are the human implications of such a fabula?
24. What were the Renaissance beliefs concerning necromancy and black magic? Where did these beliefs come from, and why did they hold such a profound grip on the imaginations of his audiences?
25. How is the play an allegory of the life of the soul, and its relationship to the body, the choices of a lifetime, and its condition in the hereafter? Why could Faustus not ultimately escape the terms of this belief system?
26. To what extent is the entire play a *momento mori* inquest, making that moment the climax of the entire dramatic action? Is it the life of an isolated mind, through exteriorization of that mind, the story of existential or solipsistic man?
27. The notion of selling one's soul, of signing a bond leading to damnation may have its equivalents in the secular world. How would that work, and in what terms does it become a cautionary tale in that way?
28. What is the play's connection to the trickster of forbidden powers, the outsider, wanderer, who makes his way as an itinerant entertainer? Why does Marlowe make such scenes the essence of Faustus's life that fills in his career from the bond to the days just before his death 24 years later?
29. How does Helen of Troy make her way into the play, through what ancient device? What does she represent? What is she in fact? And why does she represent both the fulfilment and spiritual nadir of Faustus career?
30. Is there a conflict of world orders in the play between the universal Christian story of the "Everyman" whose life is all a preparation for heaven or hell and the new Humanist order in which secular and scientific man is the centre and measure of all things? Were these two orders in conflict, or were there Christian humanists who successfully blended the two?
31. What is despair to the play, and where does it figure most prominently? Does Faustus misread scripture and misconstrue the promises of God? Is his despair the very cause of his damnation? How does that work theologically?
32. Marlowe, in the first instance, set out to dramatize the original *Faustbuch*, recently translated into English. Do you think the play shows an evolving design as he worked his way through the materials that might indicate that Marlowe mined a source rather deeper than he himself was then aware?

JONSON

33. Jonson's *Alchemist* is a play about acquisitiveness? What is that all about, and what is the crisis for Jonson concerning material man and his confused longings and desires and their relationship to wealth and possessions?

34. Why does Face get away? Shouldn't he be punished too?
35. How does alchemy work in the play? What were the current beliefs about the "art" in Jacobean England? Were there still believers?
36. Who are the gulls and who are the knaves in the play? Does Jonson tend to see his world divided according to practitioners and their victims? What makes victims? What makes knaves? If knaves punish fools, who punishes knaves?
37. In this play, the alchemists are pseudo-operators, essentially operating a confidence game. How does that work, and why is it the perfect vehicle for revealing the follies of victims who should have known better?
38. Why is Sir Epicure Mammon a candidate for trickery? What are the particular epicurean terms of his self-deception and misplaced desires? Is he a comic character all the same, or merely pathetic?
39. Do we feel any pity for these characters? If not, cheated and deceived as they are, why not? Is Jonson's vision of the world a tough-minded one? Stated otherwise, do we not need to feel empathy somewhere in order to feel suspense for these characters? If not, why do we continue reading?
40. What is the satiric mode, how is it defined, and employed in this play? Can we speak of a satiric vision, having its own laws of judgement and justice? What constitutes comic justice in this play? How do we know that everyone got what he/she deserved, and that the play ends with a perfect quid pro quo?
41. How does Jonson use his theatrical space? Is he closer to the classical unities of time, space, and ethos? How could that matter to the success of this play rather more than, say, in a Shakespearean romance or tragedy? Or, why is incremental speed and claustrophobia so important to his dramaturgy?
42. This is "city" comedy of a kind, being acted in the very neighbourhood in which the play action takes place. Why does it matter that this is a completely contemporary London play; what illusion must that have given to the first audiences?

SHAKESPEARE

43. Shakespeare's sonnets are short lyrics, personal yet public, arranged in a collection of poems. What are the characteristics of lyric, and of the sonnet as a lyric form?
44. The Shakespeare cycle of sonnets has parts and progressions that suggest a story. How can this story be described? Is it complete, implied, fragmented, undisclosed, subdivided into sections, psychological?
45. Poems imply audiences, the poet himself, the ideas they are sometimes addressed to (apostrophe), the person they are about—a friend, a lover, a patron—the coterie reader among friends among whom these poems first circulated, and the reader for all posterity (including us). How do these poems in a sense change as the sense of the audience changes?
46. Poems make use of images, things from reality made to be seen in the imagination through words. How do words convert to images in these poems, how are they selected, and do they take on the power of pictorial thematics?
47. The poet is always present in the lyric because the passions painted are his, or at least those of his representative, the persona, in the poem. Can they be read

autobiographically, or should the reader resist biographical readings either because the poems are about so much more, or because the writer has constructed, hidden, or even defaced himself in the creative act?

48. Inevitably one must talk about meanings and themes, such as time, love, friendship, ruins, beauty, nature, procreation, self-loathing, lust and more. Is there a way to separate cliché in these matters from archetypal significance and the great issues of life? This is a difficult question. Are these poems seeking to strike a place of novelty and particularity against the generic? How can the critical act sustain this?
49. Shakespeare's sonnets are sometimes cryptic, almost obscure, condensed, purposefully ambiguous, paradoxical, equivocal. These are not all the same problems. What was done intentionally? What appears so because of the passage of time? What results from Shakespeare's saturated and superimposed kind of style? To what extent is ambiguity the chosen quality of this art form? Is brevity, concentration, proto-obscurity a calculated experiential quickener?
50. The English sonnet is closely associated with Shakespeare, but he was not the only practitioner. Many of his contemporaries were writing them, modifying the form, adapting its uses. What can their works tell us about Shakespeare's choices? Are they a context to his accomplishment, as his is for them?

(DONI, I may or may not decide to put this on the course; ignore as necessary.)

51. *The Moral Philosophy of Doni* is a collection of beast fables better known as *The Fables of Bidpai*. These are among the most widely travelled, best-loved, and most translated fables in the world. Is it important that the Elizabethans also should have adopted them for translation? What does humanist translation mean to the development of a national literature?
52. What is the beast fable, and how does it work as a representation of human concerns? What mental transformations do we perform to adapt their meanings to human situations?
53. How do fables teach? What is didactic literature, and what are its principal characteristics? How do we learn by exempla?
54. These tales are often interrupted in the telling, and new tales begun before the first is finished, sometimes up to three or four deep? Why would a writer adopt this emboxed form known as *entrelacement*? What is gained in telling several stories at once, and what might be lost? Where else in literature is this form employed?
55. What do illustrations do for a story? How are they designed, and what do they represent? Are they aids to memory, obstacles to the free imagination, moments standing for the entire tale, or merely decorations to attract buyers? Do they, in fact, make the stories work almost as emblems? What then is a Renaissance emblem?
56. As a matter of history, stories retold are sometimes altered in transmission, selected or dropped. Are there cultural issues at work, questions of language, or questions of the survival of the fittest stories? How did the collection as presented by North come into existence in relation to the ancient *Panchatantra*?
57. Who is the author of these stories? Are they part of the wisdom of the race? How adequately do they train the *homo politicus* as they claim to do? Why did these

stories survive so well just in terms of intrinsic characteristics? What do they tell us about the human mind and the priorities of the generic imagination? (That's a hard one!)

(SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT)

58. Who is this Green Knight, and what is the significance of his green clothes? What kind of a game does he seek to play, and is this a real possibility or just a symbolic challenge? Why Arthur's court? And why the Christmas season?
59. Sir Gawain agrees to a quest, to go in search of this Green Knight a year later to replay the same game. How do questing and gaming and sexuality all come together in the same plot design? Are they always united in this way, or is this a literary construct?
60. Why is the work divided into four sections called fitts? Is there any sense of the aesthetic unity of each part that might be given a sub-title?
61. How do we account for Gawain's humiliation and shame in light of the trickery he has been subjected to? This is a question of his character attuned to cultural expectations. He feels self-judged by conflicting but determinant elements of his nearest cultural values. What are these respective behavioural codes: Christian faith, chivalry, warrior courage and integrity, duties of the retainer to his liege lord? Why is this a personal quest as well as a geographical one, and why does he take it so hard?
62. Is there a "Wasteland" motif lingering in the background, and how does this word its way into the poem? What does it signify, and was it a recognized part of medieval mythological consciousness?
63. How effectively or ambiguously does the poem vacillate between the socially plausible and the fictionally fantastic? Does the poem intrigue us because we are sometimes mystified by the mimetic levels we are in: the real world and the imaginative world? How does this work in the poem? Is it strictly a matter of conventions—things audiences were used to as part of meeting their own literary culture—or is the Gawain poet pushing these conventions to new levels?

A few questions about term papers often asked.

1. Do I need to do a research paper? By that students mean a documented "library" paper. The short answer is not necessarily, although that leaves you entirely on your own for wits, perspicacity, and experience before potentially demanding texts which have already gathered in their wake a rich critical heritage. In my experience there is always value in dialoguing with the published experts in shaping your own critical arguments and perspectives. Moreover, it provides you with experience in participating in that great critical dialogue that is at the heart of the discipline, testing your own wits against the experts. It is a chance to take sides, qualify, disagree, synthesize, always maintaining control over your own

argument by making the critics contributors to the production of your own thesis. Is this a form of disinterest in your personal views? Not at all, but a way of helping you to shape those views to the maximum of your intellectual insights and sophistication.

2. Are there set guidelines for format, documentation, spelling, style etc.? There used to be in days of yore, when only 2 or 3 style-sheets were in vogue. Now there are many from organizations like the MLA to leading presses like Chicago, not to mention departmental formats, social science formats, footnote and endnote options, and much more. Choose a current one and follow it systematically. Double space and leave me some margins to write comments in. Punctuate your notes consistently. Cover pages are pretty but not essential. Identify yourself. Spell as accurately as you can. Add new words to your vocabulary, but check out their meanings, or run the risk of amusing me with your malapropisms (which I used to collect). Watch out for the usual stylistic traps: comma splices, false parallels, misused adverbs, dangling modifiers, standard uses of colons and semi-colons—all of these things having little effect upon the grade, by the bye, unless you are really careless or defective in these matters. It is really a matter of courtesy to the reader and effectiveness as a writer: cogency of expression (ungrammatical sentences are usually vague as well), putting your best pre-professional look forward, taking pride in precision and the conventions of the language.
3. What am I looking for, and how do you get a good grade? A fair question, I suppose. I'm looking for your capacity to work with important ideas, an ability to define, debate methodically, and come to meaningful and significant conclusions about literature, interpretation, and historical understanding. This entails reading skills, research skills, and writing skills. You need to build an argument systematically, first points first, main questions and subsequent questions, signposting your argument as it proceeds with all the appropriate "buts, moreovers, insofar as, nevertheless, inversely, in addition to, or because of," etc. Sound argumentation means limiting the topic, making it matter, using clear principles and methodologies, working with the established ideas of critical debate, writing idiomatically with proper clarification and subordination of parts—all the things you have been training to do from your earliest years, now carried forward to a second year university level. Because we study "English," the expectations concerning style and usage go up for us all! "A" papers show achievement in all of the above, even to a point of originality and unique insight—something that excites me that I have never thought about before! "B" papers are workperson-like, competent, less original but sound, basically literate and cogent, interesting to routine, with a sense of what is important to the study of a literary text and how such topics might be approached. "C" papers have promise but lack in originality, in precision, in a certain use of communications skills, tackle pedestrian topics, tend to over cite other sources—all of which should be fixed as urgently as possible. "D" papers really fall below standards on any or several of the points listed above, so unless you are calculating the mediocrity to get done in a hurry, you might want to consider whether English literature is

really your *forté*. I haven't given an "F" to a serious attempt to write a term paper in years, but I suppose that a total collapse in relation to the above would qualify.

4. Should I adopt a current critical school—feminist, gay, psychological, Marxist, postmodernist, new historicist, archetypal, cognitive, post colonial, Lacanian, Derridean—and read works through one of these points of view? You could, but these are often more of a liability than a help. Rather than build up one of these critical schools from its foundations on your own, you would be forced to learn a few of the basic concepts and then apply them largely in cookie cutter fashion. Moreover, these approaches are often polemical, so that rather than defending your own argument, you might find yourself trying to defend the rationale for an entire school—which is no easy task. Ipso facto, adopting one of these schools means adopting its rationale. Moreover, critical approaches that carry political and social agendas tend to hi-jack literature to activist ends, which means demonstrating that the work under examination is not violated by such interpretations. The cogency and credibility of arguments is everything, and unless you are an advanced student of literature, these arguments often fail. My recommendation is to stay eclectic for a while longer, keep all the basic options open, read as critically as you can on your own, dialogue with a variety of critical approaches, and stay close to textual evidence and good contextualizing judgement. Try to reconstruct the received ideas of former ages and to understand literature in its own times as well as our own. My own critical stance is largely cognitive, in short, reading literature in light of how brains work—fascinating, but really demanding. Otherwise, I remain, in my own writing, largely eclectic.
5. Can I write about texts not on the course? No, or only in supporting roles. I actually prefer that the first term paper deal with one of the authors from the first term; the same for the second.
6. How much time should I spend on these papers? As much time as you have, which is probably a question of lifestyle as well as discipline and exacting standards. Ben Jonson recommended rereading your work many times as you write it. Not a bad idea. Go over your work asking as many different questions of it as you can concerning clarity of argumentation, consistency of presentation, originality of ideas, diversity of secondary materials, accuracy in the reading of the original, strength and particularity of vocabulary, and more. Lead a pure life.