

## **Senior Oral Exam Topics List, with Sample Questions** **America Field, example 2**

### **Topic I. The Creation of Race in Britain and America: 1607-1797**

Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719)

Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (1789)

Prince Hall, "A Charge" (1797)

Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, "A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia" (1794)

Phillis Wheatley, "To Maecenas" (1773), "On the Death of the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield" (1773)

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley: America's First Black Poet and her Encounters with the Founding Fathers* (2003)

Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (1975)

### **SAMPLE QUESTIONS**

1. Both Defoe and Prince Hall conceive of difference and commonality as much in terms of religion as in race. Hall, for instance, suggests that the bonds of "the whole family of mankind" under God should prevent division arising from racial difference. Please compare the relationship between race and religion in Defoe and Prince Hall.
2. How does Wheatley's use of classical tropes and themes affect her treatment of race? Please comment on this question with reference to her concept of glory.
3. Edmund Morgan's argument in *American Slavery, American Freedom* - that new race ideologies emerged in the Chesapeake with the rising economic value of slaves in the late seventeenth century - has been criticized as overly mechanical and economic. Do you agree with his economic argument, or do you see other factors as more important in the creation of racial attitudes? In particular, how might you use Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* to argue for or against his case?
4. What do you mean by "Creation" of race in Britain and America, and can you explain why you chose 1607 as a starting point and 1797 as an end? What other important moments should we use to periodize this "creation"?
5. Most of your primary sources focus on African American experience, but Morgan's argument points to the significance of Native Americans in the history of racial ideas. How would Native American stories figure in a history you might write on the creation of race in North America?

**Topic II. Race, Motherhood and Slavery in Antebellum America**

William Wells Brown, *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter* (1853)

Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845)

Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861)

Harriet Wilson, *Our Nig, or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859)

Jacqueline Jones, "My Mother was Much of a Woman: Slavery." In *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (1985)

Stephanie Shaw, "Mothering Under Slavery in the Antebellum South." In *Mothers and Motherhood: Readings in American History* (1997)

Claudia Tate, "Maternal Discourses as Antebellum Social Protest." In *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine's Text at the Turn of the Century* (1992)

**SAMPLE QUESTIONS**

1. The title of *Our Nig* raises the question of to whom "our nig" belongs. How do Wilson and Jacobs envision the relationship between motherhood and property? To whom do children belong in these two texts – to the mothers, their owners/employers or themselves?
2. Please discuss the images of maternal emotion in at least two of your primary texts. Jacobs, for instance, talk about the role of fear in her experience as a mother. What other emotions figure into the representation of motherhood in this text?
3. Frederick Douglass writes very little about his mother or, for that matter, any women in his *Narrative*. How do you make sense of this absence, and can he still be used to study attitudes about motherhood and slavery in Antebellum America?
4. Can we read Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents* as a faithful depiction of women's family lives under slavery? Or, to what extent does her narrative reflect attempts to appeal to the values of Northern middle class audiences?

Transitional question: In broad terms, how would you describe some of the most significant shifts in the American construction and representation of race from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century?

**Topic III. Modernism and the First World War**

T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* (1922)

Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (1929)

Wallace Stevens, "The Death of a Soldier" (1923)

Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925)

Allyson Booth, *Postcards from the Trenches: Negotiating the Space between Modernism and the First World War* (1996)

David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (1980)

**SAMPLE QUESTIONS**

1. Eliot and Stevens both reflect upon death with reference to the seasons of the year. Stevens, for instance, employs the conventional association of autumn and death. Please contrast their respective uses of seasonal imagery and explain how it relates to their conceptions of mortality.
2. In Booth's *Postcards from the Trenches*, she writes about Woolf's representation of a "collective generational failure of vision" during the First World War. Is there anything comparable in Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*? What does this "failure of vision" entail?
3. Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* has been understood as a critique not only of the treatment of wartime trauma, but also the class system in post-war England. Do you agree with that characterization, and can we see similar critiques of social inequality in Hemingway's *Farewell to Arms* or Eliot's *Waste Land* or Stevens's "The Death of a Soldier"?
4. When did the United States enter World War I? Did the kinds of physical and mental trauma that Booth says characterized British experiences of the war also define Americans' ideas and memories of it?

### Topic IV. The Evolution of Twentieth-Century American Feminism

The Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement." In *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, but Some of Us are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (1982)

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Herland* (1915)

Tillie Olsen, *Yonnondio: From the Thirties* (1930s; 1974)

Adrienne Rich, "Rape" (1973)

Betye Saar, *Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1972)

Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: an Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" (1988)

Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (2004)

### **SAMPLE QUESTIONS**

1. Please explain Butler's performative concept of gender and suggest how it might help us to account for the concept of gender found in "A Black Feminist Statement."
2. If *Herland* had been written by Tillie Olsen, what features of it -- political, familial, etc. -- might have been different? How does Gilman's social critique differ from that of Olsen?
3. Your list reflects an interest in the relationship between twentieth-century American feminism and questions of social justice in the workplace. What do you see as the key moments, or key developments, in a history of the relationship between feminism and workers rights movements?
4. Taking into account some of the themes from your section on Modernism and the First World War, is there a way to consider Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* and a World War I novel?

Transitional question: The concept of "self-realization" as it figures in twentieth-century American feminist writing seems, at points, to assume the existence of an "authentic" gendered self, whereas the notion of gender performance, such as we find in Judith Butler's work, does not. Please reflect upon the question of how we read feminist writings differently when we consider them in light of a performative model of gender identity. Please use examples from Olsen, Marshall, or other primary sources.

**Topic V. Women and Work in Post-War America**

Walter Lang, dir., *Desk Set* (1957)

Paule Marshall, *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959)

Dawn Powell, *The Locusts Have no King* (1948)

William Steig, "Self-Realization is all we Women Want" (1951)

Clark Davis, "'Girls in Grey Flannel Suits': White Career Women in Postwar American Culture." In *Cultures of Commerce: Representation and American Business Culture, 1877-1960* (2006)

Jacqueline Jones, "The Roots of Two Revolutions, 1940-1955." In *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (1985)

Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (1988)

Joanne Meyerowitz, "Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958." In *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (1994)

**SAMPLE QUESTIONS**

1. Please define the concept of "self-realization" and comment on the various modes of self-realization found in at least two of your primary texts. Do we see different conceptions of self-realization in, for example, Marshall and Powell?
2. Walter Lang's "Desk Set" considers the question of gender with relation to technology. Using at least one of your secondary sources, please comment on the way in which worries about technology are connected with questions about gender in this film.
3. When do you consider Second-Wave Feminism to have emerged? What events or texts do you think played the largest role in the creation, or identification, of that movement? Which of your primary texts do you consider part of that movement, and why?
4. Please talk about the way the built environments of the 1940s operate in Paule Marshall and Dawn Powell's novels to shape women's experiences or symbolize their characters hopes and desires? Can we use any of Allyson Booth's methods for studying spacial experience in WWI to describe these stories as reflecting particularly WWII notions of space?