

World Literature I Discussion Prompts

Unit I: Ancient Greece – Homer’s *The Odyssey*

1. What is happening in Ithaca since Odysseus didn’t return home from the war in Troy? Why do you think the suitors want to marry Penelope? Why are they not worried about how they are treating the household’s food and property?
2. With each episode during his return to Ithaca, Odysseus loses more of his possessions and men. What do you think is the point of all the losses? What does he gain with each encounter?
3. The gods intervene at many points on Odysseus’s journey home and after his return home. Pick three incidents of a god’s intervention and explain how it influences both the action and Odysseus’s personal development as a great man.
4. After the suitors fail the bow test, Odysseus slaughters them. Is he justified in doing so? Why or why not? Also, after the slaughter of the suitors, how does Odysseus deal with the wrath of the suitors’ families? What does this reveal about his character, even at the end of the epic where he has already reclaimed his kingdom and his family?
5. Odysseus’ son Telemachus is not essential to move the plot to its logical conclusion. However, the first four books of the epic poem is Telemachus’ journey towards his own personal development. What role does Telemachus play in the story, especially in contrast with Odysseus (his father) and/or Nausicäa (another young royal person)?
6. Although women had little power in the time of the *Odyssey*, Penelope uses whatever is available to her to influence the action and the outcome. Trace from the beginning exactly what she did and how it influenced the action and/or outcome of her fate and her family’s fate.

Revised from Source:

<http://wnorton.com/college/english/nawest/content/quiz/short/odyssey.htm>

Recommended:

http://people.duke.edu/~wj25/UC_Web_Site/epic/study_guide3.html

Unit II: Middle Ages -- *Beowulf*

1. Is *Beowulf* an epic? What sort of social order produces “epic” poetry? What values does the poem promote, and how does it promote them?
2. Look at the religious references in the poem: what are the names for God? What biblical events are mentioned, and who mentions them? What specifically pagan practices (sacrifice, burial, augury, etc.) are described? How do the characters see their relationship to God (or the gods)? Does the heroic code expressed in *Beowulf* conflict with a Christian sensibility? Ultimately, why would an unnamed Christian author write a poem about a pagan hero?
3. Try to construct a relative timeline (without specific dates) for the life and death of the hero Beowulf. Why is the earliest parts of his life narrated near the last part of his life? Does this out-of-order method help or hurt us in understanding Beowulf’s life story and his relation to his society? Why or why not?
4. What is the status of gold and gift-giving in the poem? Who gives gifts, who receives them, and why? Are the modern concepts of wealth, payment, monetary worth, and greed appropriate for the world of *Beowulf*?
5. Wealhtheow, Hygd, Hildeburh, Grendel’s mother – what do the female characters in *Beowulf* do? How do they do it? And do they offer alternative perspectives on the heroic world (so seemingly centered around male action) of the poem?
6. Every culture makes distinctions between what is inside the social order and what is outside, between the human and the non-human (a category which can include animals, plants, natural processes, monsters and the miraculous). Cultures organize themselves to contain or exclude these “outside” things; social organization also works to control certain violent human tendencies inside the culture (anger, lust, fear, greed, etc.).

So how does the social world depicted in *Beowulf* do this? That is, what does it exclude, and why? What is its attitude towards the “outside” of culture? How does it control the forces that threaten social stability within the hall?

Revised from Source:

<https://web.utk.edu/~rliuzza/Beowulf/questions.htm>

Unit III: Renaissance – Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*

1. Describe the relationship between Hamlet and his mother Gertrude. Be sure to consider: (1) what was before his father Hamlet Sr.’s death and (2) why Hamlet obsesses over his mother’s marriage with Claudius, his uncle.
2. Describe the relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia. Be sure to consider: (1) what it was before Hamlet Sr.’s death; (2) why Hamlet spurns her; (3) what her father Polonius requests her to do about Hamlet; (4) the reason for her suicide; and (5) Hamlet’s reaction to it.
3. Describe Laertes’s good and bad qualities. How does he compromise his honor? What do you think about the information he learns during his duel with Hamlet? How do you feel about his death? How would you compare Hamlet to Laertes?
4. Gertrude is torn between her love for Claudius and her love for Hamlet. Explain how these two loves influence her actions toward both men, as well as toward Ophelia and Polonius.
5. Played against the story of *Hamlet* is a political intrigue involving Fortinbras, Prince of Norway who is about the same age as Hamlet. How does the timely arrival of Fortinbras at the end of the play affect the kingdom of Denmark? And what does the interaction between Fortinbras and Horatio suggest of Norway’s new relationship with Denmark?
6. Hamlet is often criticized for his hesitancy in obeying the command of his father’s ghost. Explain why he is reluctant to obey and how that reluctance influences his actions.

Revised from Source:

<http://www.norton.com/college/english/nawest/content/quiz/reading/renaissance.htm>