

Senior Oral Exam Topics List, with Sample Questions **America Field, example 3**

Topic I. Religion, “Agency” and American Slave Revolts

Phyllis Wheatley, “On Being Brought from Africa to America” (1773)

Thomas Ruffin Gray and Nat Turner, “Confessions of Nat Turner” (1831)

Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852)

Herman Melville, “Benito Cereno” (1856)

William Seward, “The Irrepressible Conflict” (1858)

Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery* (1959)

Michael P. Johnson, “Denmark Vesey and His Co-Conspirators” (2001)

Walter Johnson, “On Agency” (2003)

SAMPLE QUESTIONS

1. Why should we include Wheatley in a topic titled “American Slave Revolts?” Was Wheatley revolting? Against what?
2. What literary conventions is Stowe summoning for her narrative, and why? Are her depictions of the ways slaves understand religion and Christian thought subversive, or do they reinforce more conventional notions of that understanding? How does Topsy think she’ll get into heaven?
3. Does religious belief create “agency” or destroy it? Can you provide examples of each from your texts? Do the different genres you represent (novel, poem, short story, speech) necessarily approach the problem of agency in different ways?
4. In what ways do these texts formulate slavery as a migratory, or mobile, problem? Does its mobility contain its demise? Or vice versa?

Transitional question: How does Claude McKay’s poem “If We Must Die,” address the issues raised by Walter Johnson in his essay “On Agency”? Would Johnson see McKay as possessing “agency”?

Topic II. Being Black After Reconstruction

Charles Chesnutt, “The Goophered Grapevine” (1887)

Ida B. Wells, “Lynch Law” (1893)

Booker T. Washington, “The Atlanta Exposition Address” (1895)

W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903)

James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912)

Claude McKay, “If We Must Die” (1919)

Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (1998)

David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion* (2001)

SAMPLE QUESTIONS

1. Contrast Booker T. Washington’s vision of “work” with Chesnutt’s attitude towards it in his short story. Do the authors agree on the value of “work”? How do they conceive of the relationship between work and freedom?
2. Why does McKay choose the form he does for his poem? Is it an unusual use of the sonnet? Does the form help bridge the gap between what the poem is ostensibly “about” and what it actually invokes?
3. Is “being black” the same for men and women? How does gender shape the discussion in Wells’ text? In Washington’s? In Blight’s?
4. How is the literary construction in Washington, DuBois, and Johnson related to the problem of “reconstruction”?

Transitional question: How do authors like Stowe and Chesnutt address the relationship between humor and sentimentality and racial identity in their portrayals of the South?

Topic III. Freedom and Constraint on the Road

Walt Whitman, “Song of the Open Road” (1856)

Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (1957)

Tom Wolfe, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968)

Jane Stern, *Trucker: Portraits of the Last American Cowboy* (1975)

Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (2006)

Cynthia Golomb Dettelbach, *In the Driver’s Seat: The Automobile in American Literature and Popular Culture* (1976)

Ronald Primeau, *Romance of the Road: The Literature of the American Highway* (1996)

SAMPLE QUESTIONS

1. Do any of your texts refute or counteract Dettelbach’s formulation of the automobile in American Literature? How?
2. Would Whitman recognize the experience of the road described by McCarthy in his novel? Is the road a place of opportunity or despair? Using two of your primary texts, chart the relationship between the individual and the broader community over time.
3. The texts in this topic cover a huge sweep—150 years—of time. Can you describe some of the ways that the definitions of “freedom” and “constraint” change over that period, and some of the major reasons for those changes? How about freedom and constraint in terms of literary forms?
4. Is the road a masculine territory? How are technology and masculinity linked to each other in these works?

Topic IV. American Empire

Smedley Darlington Butler, *War is a Racket* (1934)

Henry Luce, *The American Century* (1941)

George F. Kennan, *The Long Telegram* (1946)

Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (1977)

George P. Cosmatos, *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985)

Peter Uvin, *Aiding Violence* (selection – part I) (1998)

Amy Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire* (2005)

Randall Packard, “The Making of a Tropical Disease: A Short History of Malaria” (2007)

SAMPLE QUESTIONS

1. Greenberg argues that martial masculinity invigorated American filibusters in Latin America during the antebellum period; how does her definition of martial masculinity fit with the texts presented here?
2. Discuss the visual discourse of health and disease in *Rambo*, with Packard in mind.
3. According to some of these texts, what has the role of long-distance communication been in shaping and defining American Empire? Does the changing relationship of communication/speech with actual physicality and presence have implications for American imperialism?
4. Many of these authors express disillusionment with war. How has the nature of this disillusionment changed over time?

Topic V. The Self-Made American

Anne Bradstreet, “Verses Upon the Burning of our House, July 10th, 1666” (1666)

Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (1791)

Venture Smith and Elisha Niles, *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a native of Africa* (1798)

Frederick Douglass, “What to a Slave is the Fourth of July?” (1852)

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952)

Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968)

Drew Gilpin Faust, *James Henry Hammond and the Old South* (1982)

Alfred Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party* (1999)

SAMPLE QUESTIONS

1. Both Faust and Young evidence a certain relationship to their chosen subject – how do they as historians contribute to the idea of a “self-made” American? Do they agree on what defines this role/identity? What role does one’s profession or work play in their analysis?
2. What kind of critique of the self-made American is Douglass making?
3. Does race or gender limit one’s ability to be “self-made”? For example, does the protagonist of *Invisible Man* have the same ability to “make” himself as Benjamin Franklin?
4. How do the major moments of self-definition and self-assertion in Franklin, Venture, Ellison, and Moody differ?
5. How might you describe Bradstreet as “self-made”? How does her poetic narrative, and the timing of its elements (descriptions, kinds of speech act, etc.), make this possible? Could you talk about Bradstreet as a founding mother?

Transitional question: Can you connect Douglas’s critique of “self-making” with Seward’s (in Topic I) and situate each historically?