

## **Senior Oral Exam Topics List, with Sample Questions** **Modern Europe Field, example 1 (Britain and Spain)**

### **Topic I. Bourgeoisie to Bohemians: Politics and Poetics in the European Avant-Garde**

Oscar Wilde, “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” (1891)

James Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) and *Ulysses* (1922)

Hannah Hoch, *Cut with the Dada Kitchen Knife through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch in Germany* (1919)

Joan Salvat-Papasseit, “Plàno!” (“Plano”) (1919-1924), Guillaume de Torre, “Girándula” (1923), and Rafael Alberti, “Buster Keaton busca por el bosque a su novia, que es una verdadera vaca (Poema representable)” (1929)

Luis Bunuel (1900-1980) and Salvador Dali (1904-1989): *Un chien andalou* (1928)

Stephen F. Eisenman, “the Intransigent Artist or How the Impressionists got their Name” (1986)

Maria Gough, “Paris: Capitol of the Soviet Avant-Garde” (2002)

### **SAMPLE QUESTIONS**

1. What is the “Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch in Germany”? How is Höch’s painting making a historical point? To what extent do the other sources reference specific national contexts and national histories?
2. All of primary sources, except Wilde and *Portrait*, date from the decade after World War I. Where is the war, or its legacies, in any or all of these pieces? And, to put this question together with the question about specific national contexts: to what extent do the works listed here form an international (European) avant-garde in conversation with itself, and to what extent do they reflect local circumstances and trends? (Bring in Gough here, if possible.)
3. How does Eisenman make his argument about Impressionism’s apolitical nature, and is it persuasive in the context of the works you’ve chosen? How is his analysis limited by being detectably the product of its own critical moment (1986)? Do any your texts speak to those limitations?
4. What are the effects in these texts of mixing comedy and violence? Do you see a poetics of violence emerging through them, and how would you describe it?

Transitional question: Can you talk about “Underwood Girls” in terms of a poetics of bodily violence?

**Topic II. The Body in Industrial Europe, 1912-1935**

Joseph Roth, *What I Saw: Reports from Berlin 1920-1933* (1996)

Marcel Duchamp, *Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2* (1912) and Francis Picabia, *Portrait d'une jeune fille américaine dans l'état de nudité* (Portrait of a young American girl in the state of nudity) (1915)

Federico García Lorca, "La Aurora" from *Poeta en Nueva York* (1929-1930) and Pedro Salinas, "Underwood Girls" (1931)

José Ortega y Gasset, "Arte artístico" and "Comienza la deshumanización del arte" from *La deshumanización del arte* (1925)

Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproduction" (1935)

E.P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism" (1967)

Umberto Eco, "Innovation and Repetition: Between Modern & Postmodern Aesthetics" (2005)

**SAMPLE QUESTIONS**

1. What makes Europe in 1912-1935 industrial? Why did you choose this periodization? How does it relate to 19<sup>th</sup> century industrialization? How does E.P. Thompson address, whether directly or indirectly, questions of the body and embodiment in his article?
2. To what extent do these works treat the body as a transhistorical, or even ahistorical, object or category, in contrast to historically produced machines? And to what extent do they treat it as also historically produced or constructed in some way?
3. Duchamp's painting constitutes a radical depiction of the dehumanizing of the human form—what role does time play in that dehumanization?
4. Is there a difference between literary modernism—as it arises in this moment in relation to the mechanical and industrial—and postmodernism? What does it involve?

**Topic III. Debating National Culture(s) through Language, Bilingualism, and Translation**

Douglas Hyde, “The Necessity for De-Anglicizing Ireland” (1892)

W.B. Yeats, “The Literary Movement in Ireland” (1899)

Joan Maragall, “Oda a España” (1898) and “De la palabra” (1903)

Miguel de Unamuno: “La crisis actual del patriotismo español” (1905)

Brian Friel, *Translations* (1980)

Fatima El-Tayeb, “If you can’t pronounce my name, you can just call me pride’: Afro-German Activism, Gender and Hip Hop” (2003)

T.J. Demos, “Zürich Dada and the Aesthetics of Exile” (2005)

**SAMPLE QUESTIONS**

1. Yeats and Hyde are arguing for very different sorts of cultural nationalism. How do their views about language, and the place of English in Irish cultural life, differ? How does Friel’s play comment on that debate, from the distance of 1980?
2. What are the historical circumstances in Spain and Ireland at the turn of the nineteenth century that drive these authors’ interest in national culture and language? In other words, why linguistic nationalism, and why in these places?
3. Why does Yeats situate himself where he does in his essay, or maintain the fiction of distance between himself and the Abbey Theater?
4. How do these texts distinguish between language—the tongue of a place—and literature? How are they connected? In what ways might that distinction matter?

Transitional question: Topics 3 & 4 both bring Spain and Ireland together, at two different historical moments. Why did you decide to do this? How do their historical experiences compare, across these two topics?

**Topic IV. Black and Tans to Red: Civil War in Ireland and Spain, 1919-1939**

Sean O'Casey, *The Plough and the Stars* (1926)

W.B. Yeats, "Easter 1916" (1921) and "Meditations in Time of Civil War" (1928)

Elizabeth Bowen, *The Last September* (1929)

Pablo Neruda, "Explico algunas cosas" (1935-1945), W.H. Auden, "Spain" (1936), and Pablo Picasso, "Guernica" (1937) from Paris exhibition

Kate O'Brien, selections from *Farewell, Spain* (1937)

Marcè Rodoreda, *La plaza del diamante* (*The Time of the Doves*) (1965)

Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975)

Declan Kiberd, "Elizabeth Bowen—The Dandy in Revolt" and "The Plebeians Revise the Uprising." In *Inventing Ireland* (1995)

**SAMPLE QUESTIONS**

1. What makes a conflict a "civil war"? How does the Easter 1916 Rising, treated by the Yeats poem and the O'Casey play, fit into or challenge the rubric of "civil war"?
2. The title of this topic suggests change over time: from the British Crown Forces of the Black and Tans to the socialists of the Spanish Civil War. How do you see the political ideologies of the two conflicts relating to one another, whether in terms of chronological evolution or in other ways? At the broadest level, how do socialist and anti-colonial violence co-exist in this era? Draw on O'Casey's treatment of socialism, for example.
3. Auden imagines a very distinct "yesterday" and today, where today's brutality goes back and destroys the perceived perfection of yesterday. How do his formal choices enact this disillusion? Can you connect this formulation of memory to Paul Fussell's? Or: What does Declan Kiberd mean by "invention"?
4. How do some of these texts contend with religion and religious imagery, and is there anything new about it? Or: Representations of violence here range from the highly realistic (O'Casey, Bowen) to the highly abstract (Picasso). How would you assess the range of form in your list? How do formal choices relate to the content of the piece?

Transitional question: How does that imagery relate to the imageries of violence that either of your other literary modernist topics raise?

**Topic V. Post-World War II Migration in Britain and Germany, 1945-1970**

George Lamming, *The Emigrants* (1954)

Sam Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners* (1956)

John Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* (1956)

Primo Levi, *The Reawakening* (1965)

Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, Introduction, Ch. 4 (“And So to Now”) in *Imagining the New Britain*. (2001)

Heide Fehrenbach, *Race after Hitler: Black Occupation Children in Postwar Germany and America* (2005)

**SAMPLE QUESTIONS**

1. What migrations, internal and from ‘abroad’, were occurring in Britain and Germany in this era? What were their causes? How is Osborne’s play in conversation with the two novels about West Indian immigration to Britain?
2. What is the relationship between migration and empire in these sources? Is this a topic, essentially, about “postcolonial” migration?
3. At the end of Levi’s text, he comes home from Auschwitz only to find that it has followed him there. Is this “dream within a dream” of past and present realities iterated in the other narratives of migration? Is it necessarily traumatic?
4. Why might Selvon have made the choice to write in a patois? What effect does it have in the reading? Is it alienating? What would be the purpose in alienating the reader, given the subject?

Final overall question: Three of your topics (1, 2, and 4) deal mainly with the interwar years. What would you say are the key historical and historiographical issues that define that era, as you understand it? What can we gain by recognizing that diverse works are produced simultaneously and by putting them in conversation with each other?