

ENGL 381 SAMPLE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS WITH COMMENTARY

1. From *Doctor Faustus*:

Chorus and Faustus's opening speech:

The scene opens with Faustus at his desk reading and discarding books.

- **How would you stage this scene? Consider**
 - ll. 38-46: He reads HALF of the Biblical passage, "The reward of sin is death," but neglects to read the other half: "But the gift of God is eternal life (Rom. 6.23).
- **IS FAUSTUS ALONE ON STAGE?** If not, who might be with him? What difference would it make?

The CHORUS compares Faustus to Icarus (1.21-22).

WHAT: With reference to Faustus's opening speech, discuss the idea of the OVER-REACHER. Consider:

- What limits Faustus may be over-reaching;
- the other mythical over-reacher, PROMETHEUS, who was punished for stealing fire from the gods.

SO WHAT: What is the relationship between the concept of the over-reacher and the values associated with HUMANISM?

Commented [LD1]: The question begins by asking us to envision the stage.

Commented [LD2]: It directs us to a specific passage. This forces us to be specific right from the beginning and keeps us from wandering off into generalities.

Commented [LD3]: This speculation about staging allows us to begin moving toward the deeper thematic and philosophical questions that shape the scene.

Commented [LD4]: Beginning with a "what" question brings us to the details of the text and allows us to test our reading against those of others in the group so that we can establish a baseline of understanding. The question allows us to gather our observations that will form the basis of our larger discussion.

Commented [LD5]: With that baseline of understanding and the collection of observations, we can now move to a discussion of the broader, more abstract contexts that are significant to the text.

1. From *The White Devil*

What is the status of language in 3.2?

Consider:

- the trial lawyer's "fustian" Latin and Vittoria's objection to it, particularly her reference to the "auditory" (3.2.14). To whom is she referring?
- Vittoria's and Monticelso's dispute over the meaning of "whore" and of Vittoria's blushes;
- The significance of the letter that "proves" Vittoria's relationship with Brachiano.

What is the relationship between power and language?

2. **AMAZEMENT:** "a state of mind which registers that sign and referent, name and identity, appearance and essence, have become wholly disjointed" (McAlindon, *Cosmos 2*).

Compare these additional instances of "amazement." Are all instances of amazement equivalent signals of lost bearings? Is "lost bearings" always negative? What's the significance of this pattern?

- Lyon seeing Una is "with the sight amazed" (3.5.9)->note that Una makes explicit comparison between this Lyon and RC
- Una herself upon seeing the False RC in his true form as Archimago (3.40.2)
- RC and Duesa in Castle of Pride: "frayle amazed senses" (4.7)
- Night (5.21.3)
- Una with the Satyrs (6.10.1), and they with her (6.9.6)

Commented [LD6]: Statement of general focus helps to orient us toward a large and wordy scene and to focus our attention on particular aspects.

Commented [LD7]: This is another version of a "what" question that points us toward observed patterns and details in the text.

Commented [LD8]: This phrasing is extremely useful in formulating "so what" questions as it asks us to think about broader relationships between concepts. This "so what" question is grounded on the observations gathered from the examples listed above.

Commented [LD9]: This question begins with the concept presented in secondary reading. It provides a conceptual tool that we can use to make sense of the details presented below.

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General tips to take away from the above examples:

1. Begin with observations and details to keep our discussion grounded;
2. Give your group members something specific to look at, particularly if your question is quite broad or abstract;
3. It is helpful to use your secondary reading or information provided in class as conceptual tools. Use definitions, concepts, exercises in new contexts or to explore different kinds of examples;
4. You can also use your discussion question as a way of testing out the models, readings, definitions and assumptions that you find in your secondary sources. You don't have to take them all at face value or as absolutely authoritative. Test them against the text;
5. Good questions begin from good observations and lead to contexts and significance;
6. When in doubt or if you get stuck go back to the details of the primary text.