

Literature questions

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1. What is the nature of Feudal society in the Middle Ages? How might Aquinas' concept of Natural Law reflect the more general medieval belief in hierarchy and a hierarchical universe? How does Dante's *Inferno* also reflect the medieval belief in hierarchy? In other words, how does the poem structure the punishment of sin in relationship to God's love (or its absence)? Provide two examples to illustrate this relationship, one early, one late, to show the change as we descend.

The nature of Feudal society in the Middle Ages was very much that the roles of people of various classes were very much defined. The feudal lords would rule over the peasants and each person's role in society was defined by his rank and his birth. The concept of Aquinas' Natural Law philosophy reflects the more general medieval belief in hierarchy and hierarchical universe because this philosophy implies that there is a natural state of things; for example, the poor should be beneath the rich. Also, the concept of what is right versus what is wrong is part of this Natural Law.

This idea is evident in the beliefs of the medieval period and within that particular society. In literature this belief is also reflected, such as in Dante's *Inferno*, a poem that deals with hell and damnation. In this literature the medieval belief in hierarchy is connected to the idea of man's sin. The idea of purgatory is important to the medieval belief in hierarchy because it leads one to believe that there is a natural order in the universe as well as on earth. Just as the main character in Dante's *Inferno* must go through various stages of hell and purgatory before he can be reconnected with God's love, so is this seen on earth in earthly institutions and society.

2. What are the key features of Renaissance Humanism? How does it view the capacities of humanity in distinction to the views of the Middle Ages? How might Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* reflect the new Renaissance view of humanity?

Renaissance humanism is a philosophical movement that put a great deal of emphasis on what mankind can accomplish. In direct contradiction to the traditional Christian beliefs in Europe at the time, which focused on the sinfulness of mankind and that he was nothing without God, the humanist movement steered people towards the liberal arts and the humanities in hopes that the potential of mankind could be appreciated.

This philosophy was almost heretical because it places such an emphasis on beauty, art, and humankind and not completely on God. While the Middle Ages saw all things that mankind accomplished as being, by nature, sinful because of the sinful nature, humanism was all about appreciating what mankind can accomplish.

In “*Much Ado About Nothing*” by William Shakespeare the ideals of humanism are definitely reflected because of the strong emphasis on the arts and the importance of the individual as opposed to the group. In this play we see a lot of elements that are a precursor to the Romantic era, with the relationships between the lovers and the way that each of the characters interacts with each other.

3. How does the Enlightenment tend to view mankind and society? What do these thinkers believe will promote progress, happiness, and justice? How

does Voltaire's *Candide* both express and critique these Enlightenment assumptions?

The Age of Enlightenment was a time when people were beginning to reexamine the accepted ideals and beliefs of times past. It was a time of reason, when they began to really look for their own answers and not relying solely on the Church to tell them what to believe, or the monarchs. The Enlightenment viewed mankind and society as having free will, not having innate virtues given to them automatically by God. Society was supposed to help create equality, liberty, and fraternity, and even accepted forms of government were reexamined. The thinkers of the Enlightenment believed that true progress, happiness, and justice could only be achieved by creating societies that nurtured mankind's search for reason and establishing equality among people.

In Voltaire's *Candide* the writer shows the audience the transition from the beliefs of the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment in the difference between the attitudes of two of the characters. In this story Pangloss sees the world as being naturally right, while Candide feels that it is not fate that makes a person's life, but their own actions. This idea is seen throughout the story of these two characters as they progress through El Dorado, where gold is not worth anything because there is so much of it. This idea is also very rational in nature and reflects the Enlightenment view.

4. How does the Romantic movement represent a revolt against key Enlightenment values? How might Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* express some reservations about some extreme Romantic assertions, particularly

about the passions of the “ natural” self as opposed to the artificial constraints of civilization?

The Romantic movement represents a revolt against key Enlightenment values because it was during this period that there was a shift in values and core beliefs from the logical and rational emphasis of the Enlightenment to a period that focused more on the natural passions of each individual person. While the Enlightenment focuses more on the head, the Romantic period definitely was all about the heart, and people projected that shift in values through their art and writing. Everything about the Romantic period challenged the view that science, reasoning, and society were what needed to dictate one’s actions. Instead, the focus should be on one’s own wants and needs.

In a novel like *Wuthering Heights*, written during the Romantic period, these extreme Romantic assertions were even challenged. In this novel the characters are fighting with their inner passions and their natural selves. The love story between Heathcliff and Catherine is a perfect example of a Romantic relationship: she’s rich, he’s poor, and he is very much the antagonistic type of character and yet she loves him because of what is in her heart.

While the Romantic period was all about opposing the artificial constraints of civilization and not worrying about what society dictates but instead depending on their own feelings to dictate them, this novel challenges this by posing questions about whether or not the relationship between these two main characters is really a good one.

5. Andre Gide's *Straight is the Gate*, published in 1909, is set in the period just before World War One: in other words, at a time when it was still possible to hold nineteenth-century ideals. Even though Gide was unaware of the catastrophe about to fall on Europe, he still seems to sense that there is something wrong with the bourgeois world of the age. What does the story suggest is wrong with this pre-war world? How might Gide be classified as a modernist?

In Andre Gide's *Straight is the Gate* seems to suggest that there are problems existent in the pre-war world of Europe, mostly having to do with the bourgeois world of the age and the way that people viewed each other. This story at first glance is a love story that deals with the way that dedication to God can change the way people relate to each other, particularly in the relationship between Alissa and Jerome, but it shows that the Romantic ideals of the 19th century were still being held onto by many people in Europe.

Gide can be classified as a modernist because his style was very modern but, more importantly, his themes were modern in that he was a humanist that was moving away from the 19th century beliefs that were prevalent at the time and dealing with issues in society, especially issues dealing with homosexuality and challenging religious beliefs.