Study Questions: #1

*Antigone*

**Basic Questions**

1. In a paragraph or so, can you describe the central issue in the play?

2. *Strictly in terms of the play,* what is the relationship between political rules and laws of the “gods”?

3. How did Antigone justify violating the king’s rules?

   How did Creon defend his position?

   What finally persuaded Ismene that Antigone was correct, and why did Antigone respond to her sister as she did?

**For Extended Thought**

1. On what grounds did Creon claim the entitlement to speak for the “people” of Thebes?

   Who, then, was represented by the Chorus, and how can the conflict between Creon and the Chorus be accounted for? Could it have been contained?

2. Using the play as context and point of departure:

   What is “authority,” and how is it related to “higher” or “moral” law? Who interprets that law, and how can it be enforced?

   Can “authority” be made “accountable” without destroying its essence, function, and value?
Study Questions: #2
“Letter from the Birmingham Jail”

Basic Questions

1. Is the “natural law” to which Martin Luther King appeals related to the commands of the gods that Antigone claimed to have been following?

2. What is the significance of King’s willingness to accept the penalty for having violated the court’s injunction?

3. How did he justify violating the established laws of the community?

   How do you think the persons to whom King’s “Letter” was addressed would have responded to his arguments?

For Extended Thought

1. Is it possible to have a general and widely shared conception of “justice”?

2. What happens to those people who do not accept the prevailing standards? On what grounds is it appropriate—or necessary—to coerce their obedience—and/or to punish them for disobeying?
Study Questions: #3

*Lord of the Flies*

Chapters 1-5

**Basic Questions**

1. What do you think Golding was trying to accomplish in setting the novel on an uninhabited island and cutting the boys off from all contact with the outside world of adults?

   Why, then, are there so many references to that adult world and its *rules*?

2. In terms of a general conception of “authority” and “leadership,” how would you account for the relative statuses of Ralph and Jack as well as for the competition between them?

**For Extended Thought**

1. How does Piggy fit into your understanding of the *allegorical* nature and point of the novel?

2. From the same perspective, what is the function of the conch?

Chapters 6-12

**Basic Questions**

1. Why did the group ultimately split apart?

2. What sort of incentives to accept his leadership did Jack offer to the boys? By contrast, why should the boys have remained *loyal* to Ralph (and Piggy)?

**For Extended Thought**

1. Does *power* have anything to do with legitimacy and authority?

2. What validated those adult rules to which Piggy constantly appealed?

   How would the story have been different if Golding had made his characters adults trying to survive under similar conditions?
Study Questions: #4
Walt Disney’s Pinocchio

Things to Look For

1. The excellence of the cartooning and the attention to detail—especially in contrast to the computer-based pap that now passes for cartooning.

2. The constant intrusion of “bourgeois” values—virtually of the Girl/Boy Scout variety (honesty, loyalty, diligence, responsibility, etc.)—and the uses of reward and punishment rather than coherent, rational explanation to instill them.

3. No small degree of racism—note who speaks with an “Italian” accent and who does not.

Questions for Thought

1. Are there similarities between Piggy (of Lord of the Flies) and Jiminy Cricket? What does that suggest, then, about the relationship of Ralph to Pinocchio?

   If Pinocchio had simply followed Jiminy’s advice—apart from the fact that it would have made for a far less interesting and entertaining movie—how would he have acquired the characteristics necessary to transform him into a “real boy”?

2. What sorts of attitudes toward women and their roles are conveyed by the movie?

3. What do you suppose Disney thought had happened to the “Lampwick” side of Pinocchio after his virtual conversion?
Study Questions (and suggestions): #5
Spiegelman, *Maus*

Note how the use of cartoons saves Spiegelman from having to *tell* the reader everything; some things can be *shown* in much the same way that a real-life, visual experience allows us to see and understand much more than we *hear*. On p. 14 of volume I, we see the number on Vladek’s arm as he rides his exercise bicycle; the *imagery* is much more powerful than our having been *told* on p. 11 that he was a “survivor.” (And see volume II, p. 26.)

Why “Maus” rather than some other animal? Read the prefatorial newspaper article at the beginning of volume II. Why a “comic strip”? See volume II, p. 16?

**I: My Father Bleeds History**

1. Is there a difference between Artie’s intentions and the story his father wants (expects?) him to tell?

2. What sort of man do you think Vladek was? Why? (As you get further into the story, consider the [possible] relationship between Vladek’s personality and his ability to survive the camps.)

3. What is the significance of the legal nicety, p. 61, about the difference between prisoners of war and subjects of the Reich? (And note the map on p. 60.)

4. What is the point of the story about Vladek’s having thrown Artie’s coat away (pp. 67-69, and cf. p. 73, first panel)?

5. In chapter 4 (p. 71 following), everything becomes dicey as well as horrifyingly commonplace (and it continues to get worse). Contrast all this with Wolfe’s nearly indifferent optimism (p. 76, bottom). Do you think that there is a relationship?

6. What is the point of Mala’s commenting about Vladek (p. 93), “He’s more attached to things than to people!”? Is this part of his character, a result of his ordeals, what made survival possible, or some combination?

   How do you react to the relationship between Mala and Vladek? Can you account for it?

7. Do we want to say anything about the smugglers and others who, for the right price, were helping others survive? And what happened to them in the end?

8. “Arbeit macht frie” indeed (p. 157)! And Who *really* “murdered” Anja?

**II: And Here my Troubles Began**

1. How could it possibly be, p. 33, “... with everything fitted, I looked like a million”?

2. What do you make of the hitchhiker story on pp. 98-100?

3. So, having told *some* version of “Vladek’s” story, what has Artie accomplished? Did he come to terms with his own *biographical* past and his relationships to his parents? Why, then, is all this *our* business? Why not simply keep it in the family?

   Is there something here about the inescapability of human suffering and inhumanity (“evil,” greed)?

   How can Artie be a “victim” of a past that “happened” to someone else?
Study Questions: #6

Triumph of the Will

Things to Look For

1. The uses of religious (mainly Christian) symbols to make political points.

2. The various devices and appeals—mythological, factual, and demagogic—used to make Germans feel that they are, indeed, “one people” with a common history and a shared destiny.

3. The dramatic quality of the photography and the rhetorical (and emotional) force of the oratory (even if you cannot understand the German).

Questions for Thought

1. Are there similarities between Hitler and Jack and the techniques each used to “legitimate” his position?

   What options would be available to someone who opposed Hitler (or someone like him) and his policies?

2. Given the fact that Hitler was widely accepted by the German people—possibly even by a substantial majority of them—was his rule “legitimate” in any proper sense of that term?

   If so, does that mean, in the final analysis (or even earlier), that the will of the majority is correct and, in general, ought to prevail?

   If not, why not, and what could have been done against him?
Study Questions: #7
J-J Rousseau, *The Social Contract*

**Book I**

**Basic Questions**
1. How does Rousseau’s conception of the origins of government and society differ from the implicit story told by Golding?

2. What did he mean by the claim that the problem of government is to find a form of association in which people unite with others, obey themselves, and remain “as free as before”?

   “Before” what?

3. What did Rousseau mean by the “Sovereign”?

**For Extended Thought**
1. What do you think Rousseau meant by “free” (e.g., I, 6; p. 60), and how does it relate to the loss of “natural liberty” and the acquisition of “civil liberty” (I, 8; p. 65) that marks the transition from “natural” to “civil” society via the “social contract”?

2. Why was it important to Rousseau to “go back to an original covenant,” and what roles did consent and agreement play in his theory?

**Books II and IV**

**Basic Questions**
1. The central—and most troublesome—concept in Rousseau’s political theory is the “general will.” What do you think it meant, and why is it so problematic?

   Why can it never err?

   Why is the general will “indestructible”?

2. What did Rousseau mean by the term “civil religion,” and why was it so important to him?

**For Extended Thought**
1. Rousseau, perhaps more than any other political theorist, displayed the ineliminable tensions between the need for order and stability and the desirability of individual freedom. He claimed to have provided a conception of the political order that actually reconciled those conflicts. What was that formula, and how successful do you think it is?

2. For what sort of society would Rousseau’s political prescriptions be appropriate? Would they work in the United States?

   To what extent can the direct democracy of the sort he advocated be incorporated into modern politics?
Basic Questions

1. Contrast Marx’s and Engels’ notion of the origins of society and the state with that of Rousseau. What is the significance for the two political theories of the differences between those understandings of origins?

2. What, according to Marx and Engels, are the basic distinctions between the “bourgeoisie” and the “proletariat,” and on what grounds did they argue that the proletariat has been deprived of its rightful entitlements?

3. Why did the Manifesto insist that “property in land” must be abolished before communism can be established?

4. On what grounds did Marx and Engels call for the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism, and why, according to them, is a peaceful transition to communism impossible?

For Extended Thought

1. What did Marx and Engels mean by “class”?

2. What is the role of “history” in the doctrine of the Communist Manifesto?

3. What is “bourgeois freedom,” and how does it differ from the freedom that will be established after bourgeois society has been replaced?
Study Questions: #9
Margaret Atwood, The Handmaid’s Tale

In General

Atwood asks us to imagine a North American nation, “Gilead,” some time in the not-too-distant future; the dominant ideology is something like current anti-feminism, and the social and political arrangements match that ideology; these changes have been brought on—or at least are justified—by some large and apparently unsuccessful war.

Why do you think she uses this device, and how successful is it? Are you able to “suspend disbelief” in order to let the story occur? Why; or why not?

Give some thought to the ways in which Offred’s sense of self and what we would think of as “identity” are denied. Why is it necessary that she not be able to think of herself as an “autonomous” being? Which other characters in the book are (similarly) denied and/or deprived of identities?

Chapters 1-17

1. What are the purpose and function of the pseudo-religious garb in which the Handmaids are dressed and the repeated use of (transformed) religious symbolism throughout the book?

2. What is the significance of the names given to the Handmaids?

3. Why did Aunt Lydia warn the Handmaids-in-training (p. 46), “It’s not the husbands you have to watch out for, . . . it’s the Wives”?

Chapters 18-29

4. What do you think the Commander was up to in his offers of (apparent) friendship to Offred? Was he as “lonely” and without identity as she was?

5. How successful was the Gileadean political system if the Commander (and possibly Nick with him) were willing to violate its rules?

Chapters 30-46 and “Historical Note”

Study Questions: #10
Declarations, “People,” and Constitutions

I. Declarations—of Independence and Identity

1. Who are the “people” that Jefferson claims must “dissolve the political bands, which have connected them with another,” and to what extent are they being “created” by the Declaration?

And what has happened to them by the end of the text when the talk turns to “We . . . the representatives of the united States of America” and the claim that “these united colonies are and of right ought to be free and independent States”? (What is a “state” anyway?)

2. To what extent did the Seneca Falls Declaration engage in a comparable act of “creation” for American women?

3. What relationship did Jefferson’s document predicate between the pursuit of “self-evident truths” and “prudence”?

4. Why did Jefferson’s argument finally come to rest with a revolution? What, if anything, plays a comparable role for those who are denied equal rights and liberty in the Seneca Falls Declaration?

II. The Federalist Papers

1. Are/is “the People” who/those are/is “We’d” in the opening of the Constitution the same “people” referred to in the Declaration of Independence?

2. What is the conception of human nature on which the Federalist is predicated?

3. What justifications were provided for limited government? (Numbers 10 and 51, especially)

4. What, in general, was presumed to make the (new) union proposed (established?) by the Constitution desirable and necessary?

5. How was it presumed that the new union would prevent domestic “faction and insurrection”?

6. What is a “republic” and what are the advantages of that form of governance for the United States? (Number 14)

7. How was the “separation of powers” to contribute to the preservation of liberty? (Numbers 37 and 47)

8. Did Madison satisfactorily deal with the issue of whether the Convention had overstapped its mandate, or did he use its accomplishments and the advantages of a “mixed constitution” to cover over that question? (Numbers 39 and 40)

9. How, according to the Federalist, is the Constitution able to balance the need for intelligent, informed officials against the demands of something approaching the equal entitlement of the citizens and the need for restraint? (Especially numbers 70, 78, and 85)
1. Consider the following claim. Do you agree or disagree? Why?

   The Pacific Northwest is geographically as well as psychologically remote from most of the rest of the United States, and the economies of Washington and Oregon are beyond the comprehension and legitimate concerns of people living in other parts of the country, especially those living in the heavily urbanized and commercialized East.

   Thus, while it might be something of a pity to lose a few stands of so-called “ancient forests” and a few habitats of spotted owls, the ultimate decision has to be made by the people whose interests, welfare, and economic survival are at stake, not by groups of conservationists and “ecological activists” who would not suffer the consequences if logging were curtailed.

   How would people on the “other side” respond?

2. To what extent does the debate over logging in the “ancient forests” illustrate the kinds of interest-based conflicts that, following the arguments of the Federalist, are endemic to a society of the sort that the United States is?

3. Do owls (or any other creatures, for that matter) actually have rights?

   If so, are they at all like the rights that human beings have?

   How can a decision be made about a conflict that pits the so-called “rights” of animals against the economic rights of humans?

4. If resolution of the conflict over the trees were your responsibility, what would you do and why?

   For further thought:
5. Do you think that there are “obligations among [or that cut across] generations”?

   If they exist, do they include the preservation of “natural” and scenic beauty?

6. How can an aesthetic discourse be introduced into the vocabulary of contemporary American politics?
Study Questions: #12
Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*

Introduction and Chapters 1-4
1. What is the significance of Bell’s claim (p. 3) that “the fact of slavery refuses to fade, along with the deeply imbedded personal attitudes and public policy assumptions that supported it for so long”?

2. Bell concludes his “Afrolantica” myth (or parable) with the words of Frederick Douglass: “We [blacks] are Americans. We are not aliens. We are a component part of the nation. We have no disposition to renounce our nationality” (p. 46). How could that be the final spirit of a movement that began with an impulse to leave America?

3. If “racism” is not simply “a group of bad white folks whose discriminatory predilections can be controlled by well-formed laws, vigorously enforced” (p. 55), what is it?

4. Why, chapter 4, does Jason want to be, as the chapter calls him, “the last black hero”?

Chapters 5-9 and Epilogue
5. What is Erika’s “racial realism theory” (chapter 5), and what point does Bell make with that theory?

6. What conclusions do you draw from Geneva’s five “rules of racial standing”?

7. Chapter 9 provides yet another parable, but this time with a point that is virtually self-evident—or is this one so far-fetched as to be self-defeating? Why does Bell claim:
   
   From the beginning, we have been living and working for racial justice in the face of unacknowledged threat. Thus, we are closer than we may realize to those in slavery who struggled to begin and maintain families even though at any moment they might be sold, and separated, never to see one another again. (pp. 195-6)

8. What remedy does Bell provide for his bleak pronouncement that “racism lies at the center, not the periphery; in the permanent, not in the fleeting; in the real lives of black and white people, not in the sentimental caverns of the mind”? 
Study Questions: #13  
John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*

1. Who was the “audience” for *On Liberty*, and what do you take to have been the point of the essay?

2. What is wrong with what Mill called the “tyranny of the majority”? Did this have anything to do with his famous “if all mankind minus one . . .” statement of chapter 2?

3. How, according to Mill, do “liberty of thought and discussion” contribute to “intellectual advancement”?

4. What are Mill’s arguments in behalf of “individuality”? Are they sound?

5. How did Mill defend his claim (ch. 4), in effect, that it is not the business of society to make people virtuous?

6. Given Mill’s second “maxim” (ch. 5), what is the extent of society’s control over the actions of individuals, and how can its range be determined?