

**UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON**

University of London

**EXAMINATION FOR INTERNAL STUDENTS**

For The Following Qualification:–

*B.Sc. (Intercal)*

**Prim Hlth Care, Med Humanities H003: Literature and Medicine**

**COURSE CODE : PRIMH003**

**UNIT VALUE : 0.50**

**DATE : 27-APR-06**

**TIME : 09.30**

**TIME ALLOWED : 3 Hours**

# **PRIMH003**

## **iBSc in Medical Humanities 2005-2006 Literature and Medicine Module (28/4/06) Exam Questions**

**You have three hours to complete this paper.**

**You must answer TWO questions in all: ONE question from Section A, and ONE question from Section B. Each question carries equal marks.**

**Please read the questions very carefully and be sure to answer the question asked.**

### **Section A**

**You must answer ONE question from this section. This should take one and a half hours.**

**Answer either question 1, or question 2. Do not answer both of these questions.**

#### **Question 1:**

**Spend 10 to 15 minutes reading carefully the text provided. You can make notes as you read, underline phrases etc, if you wish.**

**Once you have read the text, answer the following question.**

**Discuss this text, paying particular attention to imagery and narrative viewpoint. You should also consider the way in which readers may respond to it and why. You should indicate how reading this text might help doctors and patients to reflect on the clinical encounter.**

**Section A - Question 1 text:**

John Banville 'The Sea'

Picador: London 2005: 13-23

The consultant's name was Mr Todd. This can only be considered a joke in bad taste on the part of polyglot fate. It could have been worse. There is a name De'Ath, with that fancy medical capital and apotropaic apostrophe which fool no one. This Todd addressed Anna as Mrs Morden but called me Max. I was not at all sure I liked the distinction thus made, or the gruff familiarity of his tone. His office, no, his rooms, one says rooms, as one calls him Mister not Doctor, seemed at first sight an eyrie, although they were only on the third floor. The building was a new one, all glass and steel - there was even a glass-and-steel tubular lift shaft, aptly suggestive of the barrel of a syringe, through which the life rose and fell hummily like a giant plunger being alternately pulled and pressed - and two walls of his main consulting room were sheets of plate glass from floor to ceiling. When Anna and I were shown in my eyes were dazzled by a blaze of early-autumn sunlight falling down through those vast panes. The receptionist, a blonde blur in the nurse's cost and sensible shoes that squeaked - on such an occasion who would really notice the receptionist? - laid Anna's file on Mr Todd's desk and squeakingly withdrew. Mr Todd bade us sit. I could not tolerate the thought of setting myself on a chair and went instead and stood at the glass wall, looking out. Directly below me there was an oak, or perhaps it was a beech, I am never sure of those big deciduous trees, certainly not an elm since they are all dead, but a noble thing, anyway, the summer's green of its broad canopy hardly silvered yet with autumn's hoar. Car roofs glared. A young woman in a dark suit was walking away swiftly across the car park, even at that distance I fancied I could hear her high heels tinnily clicking on the tarmac. Anna was palely reflected in the glass before me, sitting very straight on the metal chair in three-quarters profile, being the model patient, with one knee crossed on the other and her joined hands resting on her thigh. Mr Todd sat sideways at his desk riffling through the documents in her file; the pale-pink cardboard of the folder made me think of those shivery first mornings back at school after the summer holidays, the feel of brand-new schoolbooks and the somehow bodeful smell of ink and pared pencils. How the mind wanders, even on the most concentrated of occasions.

I turned from the glass, the outside become intolerable now.

Mr Todd was a burley man, not tall or heavy but very broad: one had an impression of squareness. He cultivated a reassuringly old-fashioned manner. He wore a tweed suit with a waistcoat and watch chain, and chestnut-brown brogues that Colonel Blunden would have approved. His hair was oiled in the style of an earlier time, brushed back sternly from his forehead, and he had a moustache, short and bristly, that gave him a dogged look. I realised with a mild shock that despite these calculatedly venerable effects he could not be much more than fifty. Since when did doctors start being younger than I am? On he wrote, playing for time; I did not blame him, I would have done the same, in his place. At last he put down his pen but still was disinclined to speak, giving the earnest impression of not knowing where to begin or how. There was something studied about this hesitancy, something theatrical. Again, I understand. A doctor must be as good an actor as physician. Anna shifted on her chair impatiently.

'Well, Doctor,' she said, a little too loudly, putting on the bright, tough tone of one of those film stars of the Forties, 'is it the death sentence, or do I get life?'

**PAGE 2 - CONTINUED**

**Section A - Question 1 contd:**

The room was still. Her sally of wit, surely rehearsed, had fallen flat. I had an urge to rush forward and snatch her up in my arms, fireman-fashion, and carry her bodily out of there. I did not stir. Mr Todd looked at her in mild, hare-eyed panic, his eyebrows hovering halfway up his forehead.

'Oh, we won't let you go quite yet, Mrs Morden,' he said, showing big grey teeth in an awful smile. 'No, indeed we will not.'

Another beat of silence followed that. Anna's hands were in her lap, she looked at them, frowning, as if she had not noticed them before. My right knee took fright and set to twitching.

Mr Todd launched into a forceful disquisition, polished from repeated use, on promising treatments, new drugs, the mighty arsenal of chemical weapons he had at his command; he might have been speaking of magic potions, the alchemist's physic. Anna continued frowning at her hands; she was not listening. At last he stopped and sat gazing at her with the same desperate, leperine look as before, audibly breathing, his lips drawn back in a sort of leer and those teeth on show again.

'Thank you,' she said politely in a voice that seemed now to come from very far off. She nodded to herself. 'Yes,' more remotely still, 'thank you.'

At that, as if released, Mr Todd gave his knees a quick smack with two flat palms and jumped to his feet and fairly hustled us to the door. When Anna had gone through he turned to me and gave me a gritty, man-to-man smile, and the handshake, dry, brisk, unflinching, which I am sure he reserves for the spouses at moments such as this.

The carpeted corridor absorbed our footsteps.

The lift, pressed, plunged.

We walked out into the day as if we were stepping on to a new planet, one where no one lived but us.

Arrived home, we sat outside the house in the car for a long time, loath of venturing in upon the known, saying nothing, strangers to ourselves and each other as we suddenly were. Anna looked out across the bay where the furled yachts bristled in the glistening sunlight. Her belly was swollen, a round hard lump pressing against the waistband of her skirt. She had said people would think she was pregnant - 'At my age!' - and we had laughed, not looking at each other. The gulls that nested in our chimneys had all gone back to sea by now, or migrated, or whatever it is they do. Throughout that drear summer they had wheeled above the rooftops all day long, jeering at our attempts to pretend that all was well, nothing amiss, the world continuous. But there it was, squatting in her lap, the bulge that was big baby De' Ath, burgeoning inside her, biding its time.

**Section A - Question 1 contd:**

At last we went inside, having nowhere else to go. Bright light of midday streamed in at the kitchen window and everything had a glassy, hard-edged radiance as if I were scanning the room through a camera lens. There was an impression of general, tight-lipped awkwardness, of all these homely things - jars on the shelves, saucepans on the stove, that breadboard with its jagged knife - averting their gaze from our all at once unfamiliar, afflicted presence in their midst. This, I realised miserably, this is how it would be from now on, wherever she goes the soundless clapping of the leper's bell preceding her. *How well you look!* they would explain, *why, we've never seen you better!* And she with her brilliant smile, putting on a brave face, poor Mrs Bones.

She stood in the middle of the floor in her coat and scarf, hands on her hips, casting about her with a vexed expression. She was still handsome then, high of cheekbone, her skin translucent, paper-fine. I always admired in particular her Attic profile, the nose a line of carven ivory falling sheer from the brow.

'Do you know what it is?' she said with bitter vehemence. 'It's inappropriate, that's what it is.'

I looked aside quickly for fear my eyes would give me away; one's eyes are always those of someone else, the mad and desperate dwarf crouched within. I knew what she meant. This was not supposed to have befallen her. It was not supposed to have befallen us, we were not that kind of people. Misfortune, illness, untimely death, these things happen to good folk, the humble ones, the salt of the earth, not to Anne, not to me. In the midst of the imperial progress that was our life together a grinning losel had stepped out of the cheering crowd and sketching a parody of a bow had handed my tragic queen the warrant of impeachment.

She put on a kettle of water to boil and fished in a pocket of her coat and brought out her spectacles and put them on, looping the string behind her neck. She began to weep, absent-mindedly, it might be, making no sound. I moved clumsily to embrace her but she drew back sharply.

'For heaven's sake don't fuss!' she snapped. 'I'm only dying, after all.'

The kettle came to the boil and switched itself off and the seething water inside it settled down grumpily. I marvelled, not for the first time, at the cruel complacency of ordinary things. But no, not cruel, not complacent, only indifferent, as how could they be otherwise? Henceforth I would have to address things as they are, not as I might imagine them, for this was a new version of reality. I took up the teapot and the tea, making them rattle - my hands were shaking - but she said no, she had changed her mind, it was brandy she wanted, brandy, and a cigarette, she who did not smoke, and rarely drank. She gave me the dull glare of a defiant child, standing there by the table in her coat. Her tears had stopped. She took off her glasses and dropped them to hang below her throat on their string and rubbed at her eyes with the heels of her hands. I found the brandy bottle and tremblingly poured a measure into a tumbler, the bottle-neck and the rim of the glass chattering against each other like teeth. There were no cigarettes in the house, where was I to get cigarettes? She said it was no matter, she did not really want to smoke. The steel kettle shone, a slow furl of steam at its spout, vaguely suggestive of genie and lamp. Oh, grant me a wish, just the one.

'Take off your coat, at least,' I said.

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**Section A - Question 1 contd:**

But why at least? What a business it is, the human discourse.

I gave her the glass of brandy and she stood holding it but did not drink. Light from the window behind me shone on the lenses of her spectacles where they hung at her collar bone, giving the eerie effect of another, miniature she standing close in front of her under her chin with eyes cast down. Abruptly she went slack and sat down heavily, extending her arms before her along the table in a strange, desperate-seeming gesture, as if in supplication to some unseen other seated opposite her in judgment. The tumbler in her hand knocked on the wood and splashed out half its contents. Helplessly I contemplated her. For a giddy second the notion seized me that I would never again be able to think of another word to say to her, that we would go on like this, in agonised inarticulacy, to the end. I bent and kissed the pale patch on the crown of her head the size of a sixpence where the dark hair whorled. She turned her face up to me briefly with a black look.

‘You smell of hospitals,’ she said. ‘That should be me.’

I took the tumbler from her hand and put it to my lips and drank at a draught what remained of the scorching brandy. I realised what the feeling was that had been besetting me since I had stepped that morning into the glassy glare of Mr Todd’s consulting rooms. It was embarrassment. Anna felt it as well, I was sure of it. Embarrassment, yes, a panic-stricken sense of not knowing what to say, where to look, how to behave, and something else, too, that was not quite anger but a sort of surly resentment at the predicament in which we grimly found ourselves. It was as if a secret had been imparted to us so dirty, so nasty, that we could hardly bear to remain in one another’s company yet were unable to break free, each knowing the foul thing that the other knew and bound together by that very knowledge. From this day forward all would be dissembling. There would be no other way to live with death.

Still Anna sat erect there at the table, facing away from me, her arms extended and hands lying inert with palms upturned as if for something to be dropped into them.

‘Well?’ she said without turning. ‘What now?’

**Question 2:**

Spend 10 to 15 minutes reading carefully the poem provided. You can make notes as you read, underline phrases etc, if you wish.

Once you have read the poem, answer the following question.

**Discuss this poem, paying particular attention to imagery and narrative viewpoint. You should also consider the way in which readers may respond to it and why. You should indicate how reading this poem might help doctors and patients to reflect on the clinical encounter.**

**Section A - Question 2 poem:**

**'Larynx' by Pablo Neruda**

**In 'On doctoring; Ed. Richard Reynolds, John Stone.**

**LARYNX**

Now this is it, said Death,  
and as far as I could see  
Death was looking at me, at me.

This all happened in hospital,  
in washed out corridors,  
and the doctor peered at me  
with periscopic eyes.  
He stuck his head in my mouth,  
scratched away at my larynx -  
perhaps a small seed  
of death was stuck there.

At first, I turned into smoke  
so that the cindery one  
would pass and not recognize me.  
I played the fool, I grew thin,  
pretended to be simple or transparent -  
I wanted to be a cyclist  
to pedal out of death's range.

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**Section A - Question 2 contd:**

Then rage came over me  
and I said, "Death, you bastard,  
must you always keep butting in?  
Haven't you enough with all those bones?  
I'll tell you exactly what I think:  
you have no discrimination, you're deaf  
and stupid beyond belief.

"Why are you following me?  
What do you want with my skeleton?  
Why don't you take the miserable one,  
the cataleptic, the smart one,  
the bitter, the unfaithful, the ruthless,  
the murderer, the adulterers,  
the two-faced judge,  
the deceiving journalist,  
tyrants from islands,  
those who set fire to mountains,  
the chiefs of police,  
jailers and burglars?  
Why do you have to take me?  
What business have I with Heaven?  
Hell doesn't suit me -  
I feel fine on the earth."

With such internal mutterings  
I kept myself going  
while the restless doctor  
went trampling through my lungs,  
from bronchea to bronchea  
like a bird from branch to branch.  
I couldn't feel my throat;  
my mouth was open like the jaws of a suit of armor,  
and the doctor ran up and down  
my larynx on his bicycle,  
till, serious and certain,  
he looked at me through his telescope  
and pried me loose from death.



**Section A - Question 2 contd:**

It wasn't what they had thought.  
It wasn't my turn.  
If I tell you I suffered a lot,  
and really loved the mystery,  
that Our Lord and Our Lady  
were waiting for me in their oasis,  
if I talk of enchantment,  
and being eaten up by distress at not being close to dying,  
if I say like a stupid chicken  
that I die by not dying,  
give me a boot in the butt,  
fit punishment for a liar.

translated by Alastair Reid

**Section B**

**You must answer ONE of the following questions. This should take one and a half hours.**

**Please read the questions very carefully and be sure to answer the question asked.**

**Question 3:**

'One of the main thrusts of Medical Humanities is the challenging of the political neutrality of biomedical knowledge'. Discuss this assertion with reference to Hervé Guibert's *To The Friend Who Did Not Save My Life*.

**Question 4:**

Analyse the ways in which *The Plague* by Albert Camus allows the reader to interrogate the goals and values of medicine.

**Question 5:**

Jacques Derrida argued that 'there is no outside to textuality' and that 'the reader is always outside of the text'. Explain what you understand by these statements with reference to your own reading of Ruth Picardie's *Before I Say Goodbye*.

**Question 6:**

'Disease is what the practitioner creates in the recasting of illness.' Discuss this assertion, supporting your arguments with specific references to literary texts.

**END OF PAPER**