

## PAPER TOPICS TIME AND MEANING

*Due Date* November 8th

*Length* Five pages apiece

*Guidelines* My comments on the first set of paper topics apply.

*Topics* Pick your questions for the second paper from the following. Or if you have a better idea, run it by me.

1. People often say that things are not as good as they used to be. Apart from perhaps stating the truth, what functions might such talk have for us humans?
2. Write about the significance of orbital decay in Ballard's *Cage of Sand*. Relate it to the lives of the three characters.
3. Why do we see the history of the post-apocalyptic world in *A Canticle for Leibowitz* from the perspective of the Catholic Church? What is special about the Church, that Miller gives it this role not only in the new "Dark Age", but in the later two ages as well?
4. Pick two characters from *A Canticle for Leibowitz* and compare and contrast their attitudes to time, history, or progress. How do the differences between the characters illustrate the book's concerns?
5. What is the significance of the "Wandering Jew" character in *A Canticle for Leibowitz*? How does the character contribute to the aims or themes of the book?
6. We see *A Canticle for Leibowitz*'s post-apocalyptic "Dark Age" almost entirely through the eyes of Francis. Why? (For example: How does this affect our understanding of the story's events? How does it affect our understanding of the book as a whole?)
7. Choose some story, novel, play, piece of music, TV show, computer game, whatever, that depicts a breakdown of civilization. Compare and contrast with *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. Make an interesting point.
8. How is life not like an urn full of balls? Does your answer in any way ameliorate Nietzsche's dark view that the universe is "in all eternity chaos" (*Gay Science*, §109)?

9. "If a man were called to fix the period in the history of the world during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous, he would, without hesitation, name that which elapsed from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus" (Gibbon, p. 107). Yet at exactly the same time, "the diminutive stature of mankind... was daily sinking below the old standard; and the Roman world was... peopled by a race of pygmies when the fierce giants of the north [i.e., the barbarians who tore apart the Roman empire] broke in and mended the puny breed" (p. 84). How could life be so perfect, and yet so lame? Is there a choice to be made between happiness, prosperity, and peace, on the one hand, and glory, on the other? If so, must we choose to "live dangerously" (Nietzsche, §283)? (One possible angle in writing this paper is to consider our modern life, and what Gibbon or Nietzsche might say about it. References are to the Penguin edition of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*; these passages are not included in the course reader.)
10. Why does everything in *Jealousy* happen over and over again? Is this in any sense true to life as most of us experience it?
11. Discuss the geometrization of the world in *Jealousy*.
12. If Nietzsche's "eternal recurrence" were literally true of things, what significance, if any, would this give to our actions? How does this bear on the "eternal recurrence test": that faced with an important choice, you should choose as though you would make the same choice in the same situation over and over forever?
13. According to Nietzsche, we must create our own values, that is, find our own reasons for living, our own meaning in life. But if there is really no objective scaffolding for these reasons, and if all of our accomplishments, no matter how awesome, will in the end be dispersed to the four corners of the universe, how can we stick to our resolve? When the going gets tough, why not switch to some other, more convenient, set of values? After all, you're the one who gets to choose. Why make things hard for yourself?
14. Why does Nietzsche exclaim "Long live physics!" (§335)?
15. Write a poem in rhyming couplets dramatizing the nineteenth century's spiritual crisis and its resolution in Poincaré's recurrence theorem. (By the way, did you know that the composer Arnold Schoenberg considered, in his youth, writing a symphony on the theme of the death of the bourgeois god? He later became famous for the twelve tone approach to composition, in which each note in a twelve tone scale is repeated exactly once before being used again. Only the order in which the twelve notes are used over and over again changes.) If you are brave enough to answer this question, three pages of rhyming couplets would probably be enough.