

Part 1. English Academic Writing (50%)

Please write an essay (about 500 words) speculating on the future of the humanities, based on the following excerpt from Jerome Kagan's book *The Three Cultures: Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, and the Humanities in the 21st Century* (2009).

The status hierarchy among the intellectual disciplines remains as it was fifty years ago generating a force field resembling our solar system in which the gravitational pull on each planet is proportional to its distance from the sun. In this analogy, physics is the sun and mathematics is its core. That is why a sculpture of Einstein, not Darwin, graces the grounds of the National Academy of Sciences building in Washington, DC. Chemistry and biology are the near planets and, in increasingly distant orbits, lie economics, linguistics, psychology, anthropology, sociology, and political science. Even though history and philosophy lie in appreciably more distant orbits, they are not completely free of this force field. Historians are celebrated if they weave their narratives around quantified events, such as the economic output of antebellum plantations, or posit a biological contribution to the variation in national economies. At the far edge of this hypothetical universe are the arts and literature, but they, too, are subject to this force field.

Part 2. Text analysis (50%)

Please write a well-argued response essay (500 words) to the following article "The Quality of Mercy Killing" written by Roger Rosenblatt. Explain how you feel about the issue of mercy killing, analyze the dilemma posed by Gilbert's case and the "riddle" mentioned in the last paragraph, and clarify as well the function of the allusion in the lines Rosenblatt quotes from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*.

The Quality of Mercy Killing

Roger Rosenblatt

If it were only a matter of law, the public would not feel stranded. He killed her, after all. Roswell Gilbert, a 76-year-old retired electronics engineer living in a seaside condominium in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., considered murdering his wife Emily for at least a month before shooting her through the head with a Luger as she sat on their couch. The Gilberts had been husband and wife for 51 years. They were married in 1934, the year after Calvin Coolidge died, the year after Prohibition was lifted, the year that Hank Aaron was born. At 73, Emily had Alzheimer's disease and osteoporosis; her spinal column was gradually collapsing. Roswell would not allow her to continue life as "a suffering animal," so he committed what is called a mercy killing. The jury saw only the killing; they felt Gilbert had mercy on himself. He was sentenced to 25 years with no chance of parole, which would make him 101 by the time he got out. The Governor has been asked to grant clemency. Most Floridians

polled hope that Gilbert will go free.

Not that there ever was much of a legal or practical question involved. Imagine the precedent set by freeing a killer simply because he killed for love. Othello killed for love, though his passion was loaded with a different motive. Does any feeling count, or is kindness alone an excuse for murder? Or age: maybe someone has to be 76 and married 51 years to establish his sincerity. There are an awful lot of old people and long marriages in Florida.

An organization that studies mercy killings says that nine have occurred this year alone. You cannot have a murder every time someone feels sorry for a loved one in pain. Any fool knows that.

Yet you also feel foolish watching a case like Gilbert's because, while both feet are planted firmly on the side of the law and common sense, both are firmly planted on Gilbert's side as well. The place the public really stands is nowhere: How can an act be equally destructive of society and wholly human?

In a way the issue here is age: mind and body falling away like slabs of sand off a beach cliff. If biology declares war, have people no right to a pre-emptive strike?

Now he wonders about love. He loves his wife; he tells her so; he has told her so for 51 years. And he thinks of what he meant by that: her understanding of him, her understanding of others, her sense of fun. Illness has replaced those qualities in her with screams and a face of panic. Does he love her still? Of course, he says; he hates the disease, but he loves his wife. Or—and this seems hard—does he only love what he remembers of Emily? Is the frail doll in the bed an imposter? But no; this is Emily too, the same old Emily hidden somewhere under the decaying cells and in the folds of the pain-killers. It is Emily and she is suffering and he swore he would always look after her.

He considers an irony: you always hurt the one you love. By what act or nonact would he be hurting his wife more? He remembers news stories he has read of distraught people in similar positions, pulling the plugs on sons and husbands or assisting in the suicides of desperate friends. He sympathizes, but with a purpose; he too is interested in precedents. Surely, he concludes, morality swings both ways here. What is moral for the group cannot always be moral for the individual, or there would be no individuality, no exceptions, even if the exceptions only prove the rule. Let the people have their rules. What harm would it do history to relieve Emily's pain? A little harm, perhaps, no more than that.

This is what we see in the Gilbert case, the fusion of our lives with theirs in one grand and pathetic cliché in which all lives look pretty much alike. We go round and round with Gilbert: Gilbert suddenly wondering if Emily might get better, if one of those white-coated geniuses will come up with a cure. Gilbert realizing that once Emily is gone, he will go too, since her way of life, however wretched, was their way of life. He is afraid for them both. In *The Merchant of Venice* Portia says that mercy is "twice blessed; / It blesses him that gives and him that takes." The murder committed, Gilbert does not feel blessed. At best, he feels he did right, which the outer world agrees with and denies.

Laws are unlikely to be changed by such cases: for every modification one can think of, there are too many loopholes and snares. What Gilbert did in fact erodes the whole basis of law, which is to keep people humane and civilized. Yet Gilbert was humane, civilized and wrong: a riddle. In the end we want the law intact and Gilbert free, so that society wins on both counts. What the case proves, however, is that society is helpless to do anything for Gilbert, for Emily or for itself. All we can do is recognize a real tragedy when we see one, and wonder, perhaps, if one bright morning in 1934 Gilbert read of a mercy killing in the papers, leaned earnestly across the breakfast table and told his new bride: "I couldn't do that. I could never do that."