

Questions 8–20. Read the following poem carefully before you choose your answers.

Betrothal in B Minor

All women bewail the betrothal¹ of any woman,
beamy-eyed, bedazzled, throwing a fourth finger

about like a marionette. Worse than marriage
in many ways, an engagement, be it moments or millennia,

Line

5 is a morbid exercise in hope, a mirage, a romance
befuddled by magazine photographs of lips, eyebrows,

brassieres, B-cups, bromides,² bimbos bedaubed
with kohl,³ rouged, bespangled, beaded, beheaded,

10 really, because a woman loses the brain
she was born with if she believes for a moment

she of all women will escape enslavement of mind,
milk, mooring, the machinations of centuries,

to arrive in a blissful, benign, borderless
Brook Farm⁴ where men are uxorious,⁵ mooning,

15 bewitched, besotted, bereft of all beastly,
beer-guzzling qualities. Oh, no, my dear

mademoiselle, marriage is no *déjeuner sur l'herbe*,⁶
no bebop with Little Richard⁷ for eternity,

20 no bedazzled buying spree at Bergdorf or Bensef,
no clinch on the beach with Burt Lancaster.⁸

Although it is sometimes all these things, it is,
more often, to quote la Marquise de Merteuil, “War,”

but war against the beastliness within that makes
us want to behave, eat beets, buy beef at the market,

25 wash with Fab, betray our beautiful minds
tending to the personal hygiene of midgets.

My God, Beelzebub himself could not have manufactured
a more Machiavellian maneuver to bedevil an entire

30 species than this benighted impulse to replicate
ourselves ad nauseam in the confines of a prison

so perfect, bars are redundant. Even in the Bible
all that begetting and begatting only led to misery,

morbidity, Moses, and murder. I beseech you,
my sisters, let's cease, desist, refrain,

35 take a breather, but no one can because we are
driven by tiny electrical sparks that bewilder,

befog, beguile, becloud our angelic intellect.
Besieged by hormones, we are stalked by a disease

40 unnamed, a romantic glaucoma. We are doomed to die
besmattered and besmirched beneath the dirt,

under the pinks and pansies of domestic domination.
Oh, how I loathe you—perfect curtains, exquisite chairs,

crème brûlée⁹ of my dreams. Great gods of pyromania,
begrudge not your handmaiden, your fool, the flames

45 that fall from your fiery sky, for my dress is tattered
and my shoes are different colors, blue and red.

—Barbara Hamby

¹ Engagement.

² In this usage, likely language that is clichéd or lacks sincerity.

³ A cosmetic to darken the eyelids and eyebrows.

⁴ A 19th century experiment in communal living; more generally, a utopia.

⁵ Doting upon or adoring a wife.

⁶ (Fr) A picnic lunch.

⁷ Charismatic musician of the 1950s known for his showmanship.

⁸ Iconic romantic scene in the film *From Here to Eternity* (1953).

⁹ An extremely sweet French dessert.

8. The poem's title, "Betrothal in B minor," may NOT be said to
- (A) imply via its musical key a pessimistic view of engagements
 - (B) anticipate the lower-case alliterations that pervade the poem
 - (C) suggest that a woman's marital commitment is tantamount to a funeral
 - (D) preface the disconcerting scenario established in lines 1–3
 - (E) initiate an extended metaphor reinforced by "bars" (line 31) and "refrain" (line 34)
9. The poem opens with a(n)
- (A) assertion
 - (B) conjecture
 - (C) qualification
 - (D) aphorism
 - (E) imperative
10. The speaker's depiction of a stereotypical, newly-betrothed woman primarily characterizes her as
- (A) stylishly attired
 - (B) stunned by the proposal
 - (C) shaking with emotion
 - (D) mesmerized by the ring
 - (E) hugging her fiancé
11. In visually satirizing the "mirage" of romantic bliss promised by an engagement, the speaker primarily relies upon
- (A) hopelessly idealized images in women's magazines
 - (B) a catalog of marital duties readily assumed by women
 - (C) an unflattering portrait of an archetypal post-marital husband
 - (D) an allusion to a failed utopian venture
 - (E) metaphors that imply a forfeiture of intellectual independence
12. In lines 16–20, the author conveys the less than idyllic nature of marriage by using which of the following?
- (A) negation
 - (B) extended metaphor
 - (C) an admonitory tone
 - (D) unsavory domestic images
 - (E) ironical understatement
13. The "beastliness within" to which the author refers in line 23 is women's innate sense of
- (A) jealousy
 - (B) conformity
 - (C) gravitas
 - (D) callousness
 - (E) belligerence
14. In cataloging the various female obligations that accompany marriage, the speaker seems MOST put off by which of the following?
- (A) being tied down
 - (B) forfeiting intellect
 - (C) doing chores
 - (D) going shopping
 - (E) having children
15. Words such as "machinations" (line 12) and "Machiavellian" (line 28) depict men as trying to do what to women?
- (A) blandish them
 - (B) fleece them
 - (C) seduce them
 - (D) beguile them
 - (E) silence them
16. The speaker uses the phrase "benighted impulse" (line 29) to
- (A) condemn men's insensitivity toward their spouses
 - (B) intimate that men are oblivious to their maltreatment of women
 - (C) deride women's lamentably myopic pattern of submission
 - (D) associate women's lot with Eve's transgression in Eden
 - (E) insinuate women's subliminal desire to abscond from their marriages

The poem is reprinted for your use in answering the remaining questions.

Betrothal in B Minor

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Line

5 is a morbid exercise in hope, a mirage, a romance
befuddled by magazine photographs of lips, eyebrows,

brassieres, B-cups, bromides,² bimbos bedaubed
with kohl,³ rouged, bespangled, beaded, beheaded,

really, because a woman loses the brain
10 she was born with if she believes for a moment

she of all women will escape enslavement of mind,
milk, mooring, the machinations of centuries,

to arrive in a blissful, benign, borderless
Brook Farm⁴ where men are uxorious,⁵ mooning,

15 bewitched, besotted, bereft of all beastly,
beer-guzzling qualities. Oh, no, my dear

mademoiselle, marriage is no *déjeuner sur l'herbe*,⁶
no bebop with Little Richard⁷ for eternity,

no bedazzled buying spree at Bergdorf or Borsani,
20 no clinch on the beach with Burt Lancaster.⁸

Although it is sometimes all these things, it is,
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but war against the beastliness within that makes
us want to behave, eat beets, buy beef at the market,

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My God, Beelzebub himself could not have manufactured
a more Machiavellian maneuver to bedevil an entire

species than this benighted impulse to replicate
30 ourselves ad nauseam in the confines of a prison

so perfect, bars are redundant. Even in the Bible
all that begetting and begetting only led to misery,

morbidity, Moses, and murder. I beseech you,
my sisters, let's cease, desist, refrain,

35 take a breather, but no one can because we are
driven by tiny electrical sparks that bewilder,

befog, beguile, becloud our angelic intellect.
Besieged by hormones, we are stalked by a disease

unnamed, a romantic glaucoma. We are doomed to die
40 besmattered and besmirched beneath the dirt,

under the pinks and pansies of domestic domination.
Oh, how I loathe you—perfect curtains, exquisite chairs,

crème brûlée⁹ of my dreams. Great gods of pyromania,
begrudge not your handmaiden, your fool, the flames

45 that fall from your fiery sky, for my dress is tattered
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⁷ Charismatic musician of the 1950s known for his showmanship.

⁸ Iconic romantic scene in the film *From Here to Eternity* (1953).

⁹ An extremely sweet French dessert.

17. In light of the poem as a whole, the speaker's allusion to Brook Farm sets up which of the following contrasts?
- (A) past vs. present
 - (B) fantasy vs. reality
 - (C) rusticity vs. urbanity
 - (D) work vs. recreation
 - (E) male vs. female
18. The irony that underlies lines 42–43, “Oh, how I loathe you—perfect curtains, exquisite chairs, / crème brulee of my dreams,” derives from the speaker's
- (A) rejection of her more privileged upbringing
 - (B) jealousy of the luxuries of her peers
 - (C) contempt for the overly feminine decor of her living quarters
 - (D) hatred of the infirmity and naiveté that prompts women to marry
 - (E) consciousness of the squalor and poverty which she endures
19. Ultimately, the speaker's attitude toward betrothal is BEST labeled
- (A) celebratory
 - (B) envious
 - (C) apprehensive
 - (D) optimistic
 - (E) cynical
20. All of the following are stylistic traits of the poem EXCEPT
- (A) a proliferation of alliteration
 - (B) allusions to the Bible and popular culture
 - (C) free verse couched in a taut stanzaic structure
 - (D) allegory that conceals its covert political agenda
 - (E) a concluding apostrophe that implores a *deus ex machina* to rescue her

Précis and Explication of Passage Two: Barbara Hamby’s “Betrothal in B Minor”

Barbara Hamby’s forty-six line parade of free-verse couplets forms an extremely clever poem that alliteratively satirizes the engagement process, exposing it as a seditious introduction to the constrictive world of marriage. From its opening lines, “All women bewail the betrothal of any woman—beamy-eyed, bedazzled, throwing a fourth finger—about like a marionette” (lines 1–3), the speaker offers a categorical statement that declares that the sisterhood of women detests the stereotypical, excessively romantic, newly-engaged female who, overwhelmed by rapture and an ingenuous expectation of bliss to come, proudly flaunts her ring, the symbol of her soon-to-be-married status. To the speaker, however, marriage

is a morbid exercise in hope, a mirage, a romance
befuddled by magazine photographs of lips, eyebrows,

brassieres, B-cups, bromides, bimbos bedaubed
with kohl, rouged, bespangled, beaded, beheaded,

really, because a woman loses the brain
she was born with if she believes for a moment

she of all women will escape enslavement of mind,
milk, mooring, the machinations of centuries,

to arrive in a blissful, benign, borderless
Brook Farm where men are uxorious, mooning,

bewitched, besotted, bereft of all beastly,
beer-guzzling qualities... (lines 5–16).

These enjambment-rich couplets present marriage as a futile endeavor, one spurred by advertisements in magazines that glorify everything from cosmetics to clothing to accessories. The catalog of lower case, alliterative “b” words—hence, the title—climaxes with the word “beheaded” (line 8), suggesting that this bombardment of media images showing beautiful, beaming brides fosters the illusion that marriage is bliss and not the “enslavement” (line 11) of intellect, child-rearing and domestic toil that the speaker conceives it to be. The allusion to Brook Farm, an 1840’s experiment in communal living, implies the utopian mindset with which women enter into marriage, a delusion which these soon-to-be life-partners court and fawn over for a blissful lifetime, bewitched like Bottom in Arden forest.

However, as the series of allusions in lines 17–20 suggests, “marriage is no *déjeuner sur l’herbe*, / no bebop with Little Richard for eternity, / no bedazzled buying spree at Bergdorf or Bense, / no clinch on the beach with Burt Lancaster.” In short, marriage is neither picnic nor jitterbug, neither shopping spree nor seduction. Rather, marriage is perpetual conflict, but not the war between the sexes that one is apt to anticipate. For women this conflict is an internal one, a “war against the beastliness within that makes / [them] want to behave, eat beets, buy beef at the market, / wash with Fab, betray [their] beautiful minds / tending to the personal hygiene of midgets” (lines 23–26). This “beastliness within” appears to be a combination of maternal duty and some deeply engrained but unnatural sense of subservience that compels them dutifully to assume domestic chores such as shopping and doing the laundry as well as the even greater betrayal of providing virtually sole care for any newborn infant. Her exasperated exclamation, “My God, Beelzebub himself could not have manufactured / a more Machiavellian maneuver to bedevil an entire / species than this benighted impulse to replicate / ourselves ad nauseam in the confines of a prison / so perfect, bars are redundant” (lines 27–31), essentially proclaims that women’s lot is a predetermined bargain with the devil, a hood thrown over the heads of her sisterhood, deluding them into the belief that child-bearing and child-rearing is Edenic bliss.

Her wry observation in lines 31–33, that “Even in the Bible / all that begetting and begatting only led to misery, / morbidity, Moses, and murder,” suggests that the procreative prowess of women has only plaintive and pernicious results.

In the final lines of Hamby’s poem, the speaker ardently begs her “sisters” to “cease, desist, refrain, / take a breather” (lines 34–35) but concedes that no women can

...because [they] are
driven by tiny electrical sparks that bewilder,

befog, beguile, becloud [their] angelic intellect.
Besieged by hormones, [they] are stalked by a disease

unnamed, a romantic glaucoma.... (lines 35–39).

These lines seem to suggest that women are fatally ‘wired,’ driven by physical impulses that obfuscate their innate judgment; or, perhaps, that they are beset by a “romantic glaucoma” (line 39), a malady engendered in their eyes that infatuates them with physical appearance rather than with more substantive character virtues. As a result, [they] are “doomed to die, / bespattered and besmirched beneath the dirt, under the pinks and pansies of domestic domination” (lines 39–41).

The fatalistic bent of these lines, augmented by images intimating the loss of innocence and virtuousness, condemns women to the realm of the domestic, the hellish circle of “perfect curtains, exquisite chairs, / crème brûlée of [their] dreams” (lines 42–43). In the closing apostrophe, “Great gods of pyromania, / begrudge not your handmaiden, your fool, the flames / that fall from your fiery sky, for my dress is tattered / and my shoes are different colors, blue and red” (lines 43–46), the attire of the speaker, mismatched and frayed, separates her from her “beamy-eyed, bedazzled” (line 2) counterpart in the opening stanza. Here the speaker begs for deliverance by fire so that, perhaps, she may escape being condemned to this miserable confinement by rising phoenix-like into the revitalizing air of a new, unfettered existence.

8. The poem's title, "Betrothal in B minor," may NOT be said to **(E) initiate an extended metaphor reinforced by "bars" (line 31) and "refrain" (line 34).**

Though choices A, B, C and D all have a measure of validity, the words "bars" and "refrain" are totally coincidental, the former being used in a literal sense as in a barrier or imprisonment, the latter as a verb meaning "to stop or desist."

9. The poem opens with a(n) **(A) assertion.**

An assertion is, simply put, a declaration, and the categorical claim that "All women bewail the betrothal of any woman, beamy-eyed, bedazzled, throwing a fourth finger about like a marionette" (lines 1–3) emphatically states that the starry-eyed reaction by a newly betrothed female is a cause for dismay rather than joy.

10. The speaker's depiction of a stereotypical, newly-betrothed woman primarily characterizes her as **(D) mesmerized by the ring.**

Choice D derives directly from lines 2–3, "throwing a fourth finger / about like a marionette." These words imply that the newly-betrothed woman is proudly flashing her ring to others and celebrating her soon-to-be-wed status, something that the speaker antithetically sees as a "morbid exercise in hope" (line 5).

11. In visually satirizing the "mirage" of romantic bliss promised by an engagement, the speaker primarily relies upon **(A) hopelessly idealized images in women's magazines.**

Though choices B, C, D and E all present a measure of validity, the key here is the word "primarily" which separates choice A from the pack. While the other choices are pretty much limited to one line, lines 5–8 suggest marriage "is a morbid exercise in hope, a mirage, a romance / befuddled by magazine photographs of lips, eyebrows, / brassieres, B-cups, bromides, bimbos bedaubed / with kohl, rouged, bespangled, beaded, beheaded...". This catalog of red lips, rouged cheeks, sexy undergarments, and jewelry makes A the best choice here.

12. In lines 16–20, the author conveys the less than idyllic nature of marriage by using which of the following? **(A) negation.**

The speaker's claim, "Oh, no, my dear / mademoiselle, marriage is no *déjeuner sur l'herbe*, / no bebop with Little Richard for eternity, / no bedazzled buying spree at Bergdorf or Borsari, / no clinch on the beach with Burt Lancaster," does not aver what marriage is but rather what it is *not*. Like Shakespeare's sonnet "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun," this is definition by negation: painting a picture of all the things marriage is not.

13. The "beastliness within" to which the author refers in line 23 is women's innate sense of **(B) conformity.**

The "beastliness" to which the speaker refers is said to be one "that makes / [women] want to behave, eat beets, buy beef at the market, / wash with Fab, betray our beautiful minds / tending to the personal hygiene of midguts" (lines 23–26). This catalog of unappealing chores such as dieting to maintain their shape, shopping for food, doing the laundry, and changing diapers is seen by the speaker as a betrayal of innate womanhood via its concession to the traditional roles of wife and mother.

14. In cataloging the various female obligations that accompany marriage, the speaker seems MOST put off by which of the following? **(E) having children.**

Though the speaker evinces a clear aversion to all traditional domestic and maternal duties, she saves her greatest vitriol for children, claiming that women “betray [their] beautiful minds / tending to the personal hygiene of midgets” (lines 25–26) and referring to pregnancy as “this benighted impulse to replicate / ourselves ad nauseam” (lines 29–30). The diction here connotes distaste, even disgust.

15. Words such as “machinations” (line 12) and “Machiavellian” (line 28) depict men as trying to do what to women? **(D) beguile them.**

Both of these words connote scheming, some behind-the-scenes action designed to cripple women’s independence and mobility. Alluding to the long record of propagating the species in Genesis, the speaker suggests that “Even in the Bible / all that begetting and begatting only led to misery, morbidity, Moses, and murder” (lines 31–33) and that only “Beelzebub himself [could have] manufactured” (line 27) such a devious scheme. She views the traditional roles of wife and mother as the “confines of a prison” (line 30).

16. The speaker uses the phrase “benighted impulse” (line 29) to **(C) deride women’s lamentably myopic pattern of submission.**

The word “benighted” here, which connotes being kept in a state of darkness or ignorance, is key because a more enlightened being would not have fallen prey to such a “Machiavellian maneuver to bedevil an entire / species” (lines 28–29). There are references throughout the poem—“a woman loses the brain / she was born with” (lines 9–10); “betray our beautiful minds” (line 25)—that imply that stepping blissfully and blindly into marriage results in a concurrent forfeiture of intellect.

17. In light of the poem as a whole, the speaker’s allusion to Brook Farm sets up which of the following contrasts? **(B) fantasy vs. reality.**

That Brook Farm was an experiment in communal living suggests that its participants were searching for an ideal existence; that marriage is *not* that sets up the contrast between fantasy and reality. It is neither “blissful, benign [nor] borderless” (line 13) and the men women marry are not “uxorious, mooning, / bewitched, besotted, bereft of all beastly, / beer-guzzling qualities...” (lines 14–16). In short, unlike the Edenic vision of Brook Farm, marriage is disenchanting.

18. The irony that underlies lines 42–43, “Oh, how I loathe you—perfect curtains, exquisite chairs, / crème brulee of my dreams,” derives from the speaker’s **(C) contempt for the overly feminine decor of her living quarters.**

The irony lies in the speaker’s loathing of the stereotypically feminine furnishings, the décor of curtains and chairs that comprise the “pinks and pansies of domestic domination” (line 41). The reference to “crème brulee,” an extremely delectable dessert, implies that what seems eminently desirable at first—namely, marriage—may soon become bitter and distasteful.

19. Ultimately, the speaker’s attitude toward betrothal is BEST labeled **(E) cynical**.

Choice E, cynical, is pretty much the only choice here since the speaker suggests that “a woman loses the brain / she was born with if she believes for a moment / she of all women will escape enslavement of mind, milk, mooring, the machination of centuries...” (lines 9–12). The speaker sees marriage as a “Machiavellian maneuver [designed] to bedevil an entire / species...” (lines 28–29), one that leads to a “benighted impulse to replicate / [themselves] ad nauseam in the confines of a prison / so perfect, bars are redundant” (lines 29–31), labeling it “romantic glaucoma” (line 39). Moreover, words and phrases such as “beheaded” (line 8), “enslavement of mind” (line 11), “betray our beautiful minds” (line 25) and “becloud our angelic intellect” (line 37) imply that women are out of their minds to marry.

20. All of the following are stylistic traits of the poem EXCEPT **(D) allegory that conceals its covert political agenda**.

As has been noted in the overall explication of the passage, “Betrothal in B minor” features a plethora of alliterative words beginning with the letter “b” though there are also instances of alliterative phrasings with the letters “m” (lines 32–33) and “d” (lines 39–41). The passage features allusions to the Bible (Beelzebub, Moses) and to popular culture (Little Richard, fashion magazines, fashionable retailers). The poem consists of twenty-three, unrhymed couplets with no consistent metrical pattern, and it concludes with an appeal to the “Great gods of pyromania [to] begrudge not [their] handmaiden” (lines 43–44). This information confirms the presence of choices A, B, C and E. There is nothing here that suggests a political allegory, making D the exception.