

Source Book Study Questions

1. EARLIEST ACCOUNTS OF THOMAS MORE'S LIFE

Erasmus' Letter on More (SB, pp. 3-13)

1. The opening paragraph focuses upon passion, desire, and affection. How does More stir these in his friends?
2. Erasmus warns us on lines 24-25 that drawing a portrait of More is just as difficult as drawing a portrait of the great warriors, Alexander the Great and Achilles. Erasmus also makes the striking claim that More deserves immortal fame as much as these two greatest conquerors of all time. According to this letter, what are the accomplishments of More that make him so deserving?
3. Erasmus claims that More is "a perfect example of true friendship" (line 113), and throughout the letter he emphasizes More's capacity for friendship. (See, for example, lines 23, 47, 98-126, 202-15, 252-69, 318-21.) What seems to be the source(s) of this capacity in More, according to Erasmus' description? Why does Erasmus see More as the "perfect example"?
4. In lines 89-90, Erasmus says that More had a special hatred of absolute rule and a corresponding love for equality. Which of his poems in section 4 confirm or contradict this observation? Does *Utopia* confirm or contradict this observation?
5. Erasmus often remarks on More's verbal virtues. How does More's ability to use speech well contribute to his effectiveness? In what areas of human life does More's gift with language help him and others most?
6. What light does this short biography shed upon *Utopia*?

Roper's *Life of Sir Thomas More, Knight* (SB, pp. 16-65)

1. Roper writes this life primarily as a collection of memories to be used by the professional biographer he hired, Nicholas Harpsfield. What aspects of More's life does Roper emphasize? Which aspects does he neglect? (Notice, for example, that *Utopia* is never mentioned.) What episodes most impressed you?
2. These recollections were written almost twenty years after More's death, only once Queen Mary came to the throne. Roper came to live with the Mores in 1518, while he attended law school, and he married Margaret in 1521. He remains close to Thomas More until More's death in 1535. How would you describe Roper's attitude towards More? What seemed to be More's attitude towards Roper, as indicated in this account?
3. In Erasmus' letter on More, we caught a detailed glimpse of More at a relatively young age, just at the beginning of his service under Henry. Is there consistency between Erasmus' portrait of More's character and Roper's portrait, which in a sense picks up where Erasmus left off by detailing More's professional life in the court? In other words, does More's character remain consistent before and after he enters the king's service?
4. Compare/contrast Roper's understanding of the role of conscience in More's life with Robert Bolt's in *A Man for All Seasons* and Munday and Shakespeare's in the play, *Sir Thomas More*. In which parts of Roper's *Life* is conscience emphasized most explicitly and why?

5. In Roper's history, why is More so confident in the judgment of his conscience? What guides and informs that conscience? Are all judgments of the conscience equally reliable? Explain why or why not.
6. Describe More's rhetorical strategy in the dramatic encounter with Cardinal Wolsey in the House of Commons (pp. 25-27).
7. Offer your own portrait of Richard Rich's character, decisions, and actions, and the principles informing his life.

Munday and Shakespeare's *Sir Thomas More* (SB, pp. 66-156)

1. What do the amusing play within a play, "The Marriage of Wit and Wisdom" (3.2), and More's role in it, reveal about his character?
2. In act 4, why does More refuse to sign the "Articles" drawn up by Henry VIII?
3. How does the play represent More's relationship with his family and household, especially in 4.2, 4.4 and act 5? Why exactly do his servants mourn their master's loss in 5.2?
4. What does the play reveal about the realities of public service?
5. Why does More welcome imprisonment in 5.1?
6. The play consistently represents More's merriment, even in dark hours. Is More a madman to laugh as he does? Focus on two or three merry moments and explain your sense of the role of humor or good cheer in More's drama and death.
7. Do you think the authors of the play approve or disapprove of More's decision not to refuse the mysterious "Articles"? Why or why not?
8. What does this soliloquy at the beginning of act 3 reveal about More's understanding of power?

2. WRITINGS ON LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP

On His First Love and On Detachment (SB, pp. 161-63; 171-74)

1. What do these poems reveal about More's sense of the power of emotion?
2. How do the poems suggest More's approach to governing emotion?

Twelve Properties of a Lover (SB, pp. 164-70)

1. On pages 164-69, the structure of each section is the same: the first stanza of each property describes a quality that characterizes a youthful and fervent love; the second stanza applies that quality to God. Which of these properties seems most applicable to God as a beloved? Which seems the least applicable? Why?
2. Which of the other properties surprised you the most? Why?

3. The main idea of the second last stanza ("Wageless to serve...") might be summarized this way: If we were to receive no wage for our work, three things might motivate us to work anyway: First, if the work itself were desirable; second, if those we worked for were people we loved and enjoyed; third, if we were serving those who have done much for us, we wouldn't reasonably be grasping for more in terms of wages. Using this summary as an example, paraphrase the main idea of the last stanza ("Serve God for love...").

4. Compare the Utopians' view of God with the view of God presented in this poem by Thomas More.

5. Did Thomas More love God as the Utopians love God?

Letter to John Colet (SB, pp. 175-77)

1. Describe More's portrait of city life in this letter.

2. In More's view, what do citizens need more than anything else?

More's Letters to His Children (SB, pp. 178-79; 201-3) * See Item 3 below

1. What do these letters reveal about More as a father?

2. What does More emphasize in regards to their education and upbringing?

More's Letter to His Wife (SB, pp. 180-81)

1. More wrote this letter to his wife immediately upon his son-in-law coming to report the disaster that occurred at More's farm at Chelsea. More knew that the loss was so great that he might have to sell his land. What attitude does More express in this letter?

2. What surprises you most about this letter?

3. Based on this letter, what kind of relationship does More seem to have with his wife?

More's Letter to Bonvisi (SB, pp. 182-84)

1. What does this letter reveal about More's state of mind as his trial and execution draw closer?

Plutarch's How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend (SB, pp. 185-94)

1. Why are all human beings capable of falling for flattery?

2. What is the greatest harm the flatterer can do to us, and what are some of the ways we can avoid that harm?

3. In lines 15-16 on page 189, Plutarch says that candor (speaking truthfully) can be as harmful as its opposite, flattery. How can this be true?

4. Plutarch then mentions several things that are necessary if candor is to be helpful or medicinal. List four of these, then give the line number(s) that refer to each and briefly explain.

On a False Friend (SB, p. 194)

1. How does this poem relate to Plutarch's essay?
2. Find other selections in this *Source Book* other than Plutarch that explore the same problem, and write an essay on the qualities needed for a true friend.

3. WRITINGS ON EDUCATION

More's Letter to Gonell (SB, pp. 197-200)

1. What does More consider to be the most important fruits of education?
2. What type of things do adults generally teach children to admire or esteem? What does More think is the effect of cultivating such loves?
 2. a) For what reasons does More think that pride becomes so deep-rooted in human hearts? To what virtues does he oppose pride? What does he suggest should be studied to help root out pride?

More's Letters to His Children (SB, pp. 178-79; 201-3) * See Item 2 above

1. What do these letters reveal about More as a father?
2. What does More emphasize in regards to their education and upbringing?

Letter to Oxford (SB p. 204-11)

1. The first three paragraphs form the introduction or "exordium." Why does More start in this unusual way? What effect or tone is More trying to create?
2. The next four paragraphs are the "narratio," or statement of facts. For a supposed statement of facts, More uses many emotionally-charged words such as "despised," "perverse," "insanity," "deranged," "stupid," "frivolous," "degradation," "outrageous," "Bacchanalian ravings," and "defamation." Is this a continuation of the tone of the introduction or a contrast to it? Why would he use such words with this straight-laced, academic audience?
3. The next section is called the "argument" of the letter and goes all the way to, but excludes, the last paragraph. What is the tone of this section?
4. According to More, why should one study the liberal arts and especially what the Greeks wrote?
5. What is More trying to get the leaders of Oxford to do by the end of this argument section? What does he appeal to in his efforts to get them to do it?
6. The last paragraph is the conclusion. What is the main point he wants to emphasize before he signs off?
7. What is the tone of this ending? Why would he want to end with this tone?
8. Compare and contrast More's understanding of education and the liberal arts (208) with some contemporary approaches to education.

9. Compare and contrast More's understanding of the nature and benefits of education with Raphael Hythloday's account of education in Utopia in book two.

More on Conscience (SB, pp. 212-14)

1. Does More's understanding of conscience differ from the way the term is often understood today? How or how not?

More on Pride (SB, pp. 215-20)

1. What is the nature of pride, as More sees it?

2. Is pride a function primarily of the intellect or of the imagination or of the emotions? How can one recognize and root out pride?

3. How might the Greek Plutarch's understanding of our natural susceptibility to self-love be related to More's view of our tendency toward pride?

More's Approach to Education (SB, pp. 221-26)

1. In More's opinion, what are the chief benefits of a solid liberal arts education?

2. In what kind of esteem is the study of the liberal arts held today?

4. WRITINGS ON GOVERNMENT

More on Dealing with Lions (SB, pp. 231-32)

1. Explain More's choice of the lion as a symbol for powerful kings.

Poems on the Human Condition and the Art of Governing (SB, pp. 233-34)

1. What do poems #27 through #32 illuminate about the human condition?

2. Explain three ways in which Poem #32 differs from Poem #31.

3. What different perspectives on leadership are implied in this sequence of poems?

Other Poems on Politics (SB, pp. 235-39)

1. According to poems #109 through 121, what marks the difference between the tyrant and the good ruler?

2. According to poem #198, what is the best form of government, and why? How do you account for the strange turn at the end of this poem?

3. What is the difference between the King and the Peasant, according to poem #201?

4. Why would Thomas More place poem #244 right after poem #243? (Note that Henry VIII won Tournai during his invasion of France.)

5. These poems were published with More's *Utopia* in 1518. How would they affect our reading of *Utopia*? Do they complement or contrast with the Utopian view of human nature and of government?

Petition for Freedom of Speech (SB pp. 240-41)

1. What is the tone of this paragraph? Isn't More being "overly nice" here? If so, why? And is this speech a form of flattery, or an example of effective rhetoric?

2. What are the reasons for free speech that More gives? Are these reasons primarily utilitarian, conventional, or metaphysical?

3. Would these reasons be recognized and accepted in Utopia?

More Defends the Liberty of the House (SB pp. 243-45)

1. Describe More's rhetorical strategy in this tense situation.

On Private Property, Riches, and Poverty (SB, pp. 246-52)

1. According to this account, what is Christ's teaching about riches?

2. What issues does the example of Zacchaeus clarify?

3. Would it be best that the state distribute wealth equally among all?

4. How does one determine one's duty to a very large number of neighbors?

More on Law and Liberty (SB, pp. 253-58)

1. Why does More have such a reverence for the law?

2. How does More understand liberty? How might More respond to someone who informed him that to be at liberty is "to do as one pleases"?

3. Are all laws good, in More's judgment? How ought one respond to unjust laws, according to More?

5. WRITINGS ON RELIGION

More's Conception of God (SB, pp. 261-69)

1. What images of God recur most frequently in these selections?

2. What attitude towards God does Thomas More encourage?

3. For what does More pray most frequently?

4. How do the views expressed on pp. 261-69 compare to those on pp. 164-70?
5. What view of God is implied in More's statements on pp. 334-35?

Private Judgment and God's Word (SB, pp. 270-80)

1. How does pride pose a problem in reading, and in preaching?
2. Why are all of the liberal arts useful for the study of Scripture? What other guidelines are given for the study of Scripture?
3. What reasons would justify bringing external measures to the study of Scripture?
4. Would you agree that faith never goes without reason? Why or why not?
5. What is More's ultimate guide in reading Scripture? Why?

The Two Swords; Heresy and Just War (SB, pp. 281-90)

1. According to More, when is the use of force against heresy justifiable (281-283)?
2. How did Augustine, Jerome, and Henry V approach the problem of heresy (284-285)?
3. What intentions guide the Church's general approach to heretics, according to More (285)?
4. What role does secular authority play in dealing with heresy (285-286)?
5. Earlier, More examined the compatibility of owning private property and observing the counsels of Christ. Here, More examines the question of punishment and the legitimate use of force, including cases of self-defense, in light of Christ's words. According to More, do the words of Christ forbid such actions? Explain.
6. In the midst of this discussion of heresy, why does More relate the story of Sandwich Harbor and the "sage old father fool in Kent" (287-288)?
7. What critique of Christian princes does More offer on p. 288? What advice does More give Christian princes in their confrontation with the Turk?
8. Explain More's interpretation of Christ's command to "love thy neighbor" on p. 289?

Defense of the Clergy (SB, pp. 291-98)

1. What does More emphasize in his portrait of the accusers of the clergy? What is their strategy? What is More's response to the accusers on 292-293?
2. How does More explain "Peter's Pence" on p. 293?
3. How does More critique the accuser's understanding of Parliament, the King, and the relation between ecclesiastical and secular power on pp. 294-296?

4. According to More, what will be some of the long-term effects of the accuser's attack on the clergy and the Church?

On the Condition of Church and State in England (SB, pp. 299-302)

1. What does More rhetorically gain by his acknowledgment that "neither party is faultless" on p. 299? What does this communicate to the reader about his ethos?
2. After acknowledging that there have been bad folk on both sides, what does More affirm about his native land? What advice does he give on the best way of "reforming" what is faulty on p. 300?
3. How does More critique the "Pacifier" (Christopher St. German) on page 301-302?

6. MORE'S LAST DAYS

More's Letter to Erasmus (SB, pp. 305-10)

1. How does More defend his reputation on pp. 306-307?
2. Why is More insistent that Erasmus publish his letter along with the epitaphs for his tomb?
3. How does More explain his resignation on the epitaph for his tombstone (307-308)? Is it the same reason he gives in his letter to Erasmus?
4. According to the epitaph, why is More arranging for the construction of his tomb?
5. In addition to his political work and career, what other things does More emphasize in the epitaphs?

More's Account of His First Interrogation (SB p. 311-15)

1. Why does More refuse the oath and the Act (312)?
2. What does Audley hope to gain by the "pageant" in the garden on pp. 312-313? How does More respond to the strange spectacle?
3. When More is asked a second time to take the oath and refuses, why won't he explain his reasons (313)?
4. On what grounds does Canterbury urge More to take the oath? What is More's response (314)?
5. In the exchange with Westminster, why is More confident in the testimony of his conscience?
6. Explain More's final position at the end of the first interrogation.

Dialogue on Conscience (SB, pp. 316-35)

* See also PDF Study Outline at:

http://www.thomasmorestudies.org/docs/Dialogue_on_Conscience_Study_Guide.pdf

1. What is the overall effect of this literary work? To what emotion(s) does it most appeal?
 2. What two-fold charge is leveled against More by Lord Chancellor Audley? How does More answer each? In his response to the fable about fools and the rain, what position does More take on wisdom and folly (322-324)?
 3. When More answers and dismisses these charges, what new issue(s) does Margaret bring up?
 4. What surprised you most in Audley's "merry tales" about More? What surprised you most in More's response to Audley? In responding to the suggestion that he is a scrupulous ass, why does More suggest that he is confident in the judgment of his conscience (325)?
 5. What does More's "merry tale" about Company (325-27) add to his fatherly conversation with Meg? Did anything strike you as "unfatherly" in this conversation? What understanding of friendship emerges from this section of the dialogue?
 6. According to this *Dialogue* (esp. 328-32), what has greater importance for More, law or conscience? Explain.
 7. Are there any issues of conscience of this kind in *Utopia*? Are there any similar conflicts between conscience and law in *Utopia*?
 8. According to this *Dialogue*, these elements seem necessary to achieve a right conscience:
 - Serious study for years, to instruct conscience (320-21, 325)
 - Determination not to act against conscience (320, 325-27, 332, 334)
 - Knowing when and when not to conform your conscience to others' (327-32)
 - Confrontation of the dangers that must be faced in living up to conscience (320, 333-35).
- Are these elements sufficient?
9. Essay question or subject for a project: Compare More's position in this dialogue with the position taken by Socrates in the *Crito*.

Tale of Mother Maud (SB, pp. 336-42)

1. Why does More tell this "silly story" (336)? How does it differ from Lord Chancellor Audley's tale of the ass and the wolf in More's *Dialogue on Conscience*? What revelation is the plot designed to help us discover?
2. Analyze the character of the fox. More calls him "good and prudent" on p. 337. In what ways is this true? In what ways is it not?
3. Compare the character of the ass as it appears here and as it appears in More's *Dialogue on Conscience*. Are they essentially the same or different?
4. One glaring contradiction between these two treatments of conscience is this: In the *Dialogue on Conscience* More insists that he will not "pin [his] soul to another man's back, not even if he's the best

man I know who is alive today" (325). He then went on to insist upon following his own conscience. In the "Tale of Mother Maud," however, he advises people to "submit the rule of their own conscience to the counsel of some good person" (341). What do you make of these contradictory statements?

5. Analyze the "performance" of the wolf's conscience. What informs his practical judgments? Did the fox understand the wolf's manner of making decisions of conscience? (Consider the narrator's claim on page 339: "What now concerns us is the consciences of them both [the ass and the wolf] in the actual performance of their penances.")

6. On page 341, the narrator defends his "preposterous...parable" by claiming that "our purpose is served by the point that it makes." What is that point?

More's Interrogation of May 1535 (SB, pp. 343-46)

1. How would you compare/contrast this interrogation with the first interrogation?
2. What is More's response to Henry's demand that he give his opinion on the Act of Supremacy (344-45)?
3. On what grounds does More argue that he is Henry's "true faithful subject" (345)? How does he respond to Cromwell's ominous threat that Henry will follow "the course of his laws toward such as he shall find obstinate"?
4. According to the end of the letter, how does More understand his present position amidst great adversity?

More's Final Interrogation, 3 June 1535 (SB, pp. 347-51)

1. What has been the effect of More's silence, according to his accusers?
2. What comforts More as he faces his accusers and adversity?
3. What "most virtuous lesson" (349) did More learn from Henry when he first entered the King's service?
4. According to More, how does his case differ from that of a heretic, who might also invoke conscience in defense of heresy?
5. How does More judge Henry's new law?
6. Why doesn't More judge the consciences of those who have taken the oath?
7. What accounts for the surety of More's conscience?

General Interrogation Questions

1. In these interrogations, how does More defend his response to the Act and oath?
2. How does Henry VIII use his power in attempting to persuade More?
3. Why is More convinced that he remains a loyal servant to the King?

Trial and Execution: The "Paris Newsletter's" Account (SB, pp. 352-55)

* See also **The Trial of Thomas More: July 1, 1535 at:**

<http://www.thomasmorestudies.org/docs/The Trial of Thomas More.pdf>

1. In your opinion, what was the most important part of More's trial? Why?
2. How does More respond to the charge that his silence on the King's Supremacy was malicious?
3. How does More respond to the charge that he conspired against the Statute in his letters with Bishop John Fisher?
4. Why did More conditionally compare the Statute to a two-edged sword?
5. On p. 354, More finally breaks his silence on the Act of Supremacy. What exactly is the judgment of More's conscience?
6. How does More respond to the Chancellor's claim that More is presuming that he is wiser than all the bishops and nobles of the realm?
7. After he discharges his conscience, what is More's final act before his accusers?
8. How does More approach his execution?
9. Essay or project question: Compare Thomas More's trial and death with Socrates' trial and sentencing in Plato's *Apology*. Why exactly are More and Socrates put to death? What similarities and differences do you see in the lives and deaths of the Greek philosopher and the English statesman?

Last Words Before Execution, 6 July 1535 (SB, pp. 357-58)

1. What is the significance of More's final statement, "I die the King's good servant, and God's first"? Why would Robert Bolt in *A Man for All Seasons* prefer "I died the King's good servant, but God's first"? What is the difference in these two wordings? How compatible are these two forms of service? What do you make of More's suggestion that his death is a final act of good service for the King?