

HUM 110, REED COLLEGE
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THE LIFE OF ANTHONY: STUDY QUESTIONS

1. "The *Life of Anthony*, the desert hermit, was one of the most popular among Christian biographies. Written in Greek by Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, shortly after the monk's death, which occurred in 356, it had great and immediate success and was translated throughout the Mediterranean world. At Rome it achieved such great popularity that in slightly more than fifteen years two versions of it were published. The reasons for such success are multiple. Curiosity about the exotic setting (Anthony was a Copt) and the novel-like liveliness of the biography may have played a part, and Christian circles undoubtedly had a strong interest in the mode of the life described in the work, the rejection of earthly things that seemed to go in the direction opposite to that of the official church, which was increasingly eager to augment its institutional power" (Gian Biagio Conte *Latin Literature: A History* 654). How does this conversion narrative compare to the *Golden Ass* in style, content, and narrative structure? What differences do you notice between the life of a convert in the cult of Isis and in early Christianity?

2. In the *Confessions* Augustine recounts the following ecstatic moment when two men read *The Life of Anthony*. What aspects of the *Life of Anthony*. (either stylistic or content-wise) might have led to such a revelation? Do you, as a reader, ever find the text ecstatic? What answers does Anthony have for the men regarding "what do we hope to achieve with our labours" and "what is the aim of our life?"

In their wanderings they happened on a certain house where there lived some of your servants, poor in spirit: "of such is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:3). They found there a book in which was written the Life of Anthony. One of them began to read it. He was amazed and set on fire, and during his reading began to think of taking up this way of life and of leaving his secular post in the civil service to be your servant. For they were agents in the special branch. Suddenly he was filled with holy love and sobering shame. Angry with himself, he turned his eyes on his friend and said to him, "Tell me, I beg of you, what do we hope to achieve with our labours? What is the aim of our life?...So he spoke, and in the pain at coming to birth of new life, he returned his eyes to the book's pages. He read on and experienced a conversion inwardly where you alone could see and, as was soon evident, his mind rid itself of the world (Augustine, *Confessions* pp.143-44; VIII.vi .15).

3. What are St. Athanasius' favorite scriptures to quote? (you might want to keep a running tally as you read.) What does his choice say about his theological leanings?

4. *The Life of Anthony* revolves around his flight from civilization into the isolated desert. Why does he leave civilization? What parallels do you notice between these journey and stories from the Bible? What meaning do you find in these parallels? What heroes in American culture make a similar flight away from culture into the solitary "wilderness"? How do you see the themes in *The Life of Anthony* being reiterated in the lives of these heroes?

5. The chapter in Brown's *World of Late Antiquity* identifies a series of changes in Christianity between 170 and 400 CE. What were they? How does *The Life of Anthony* reflect these changes?