**Questions for *Mortal Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery***

**by Richard Selzer**

**In** **1976, Richard Selzer** wrote *Mortal Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery* as a dramatic account of his early life and love of anatomy that led him to become a successful surgeon. The book is partially a factual account of his experiences, and partially a poetic look at the feelings and emotions of surgery, which can be a traumatic experience for both surgeon and patient.

***Use your own paper to answer the questions thoroughly and completely.***

**“The Exact Location of the Soul”**

1. According to the first three paragraphs, why, most essentially, does Selzer write?

2. What do you think he means when he claims that “man is not ugly . . . he is Beauty itself.”

3. What is the lesson of the botfly tale?

4. What is the difference between a surgeon and a doctor?

5. Note the vocabulary in the section quoted below. Can you see more than one level/kind of diction being sampled? For example, what audiences might be most appropriate for the underlined terms? The same, different? Why do you suppose he mixes these vocabularies?

“Men have not [women’s] cellular, enzymatic wisdom. Man is albuminoid, proteinaceous, laked pearl; woman is yolky, ovoid, rich.”

6. Selzer is a word collector, and he claims that, when he began writing, he spent a couple of years just experimenting with words, learning new ones. Please jot down three words or phrases that you found striking in this essay. Explain briefly how and why each of them caught your attention.

**“The Surgeon as Priest”**

7. How and why is gazing inside the body both evil and yet a daring journey?

8. Why does Selzer claim that surgery is a “Mass served with Body and Blood?” Please explain what he is trying to say using this metaphor, given the contents of the essay.

9. Why does Selzer briefly switch POV on page 26? What effect does this have?

10. Read page 27 again. Does Selzer once again mix vocabularies? Shift tone? Where and to what effect?

11. Why does Joe take on a “terrible ordinariness” when he heals?

12. What is to be learned of dreams, brains, souls from the scene on pages 31-32, at the end of which Selzer brushes a bit of brain from a girls shoulder?

13. Why does Selzer show such respect as he does for Yeshi Dhonden? Why does this memory close the essay about surgeons and priests?

14. Selzer says that, in action, the surgeon becomes a hierophant. What is a hierophant? Why does Selzer make this claim?

**“Lessons from the Art”**

15. How/why does a surgeon perform with both “arrogance and innocence?”

16. Selzer has written of his tremendous respect for nurses. Take a look at the scene about the English professor. Pay close attention to the nurse. Why the marriage metaphors? (remember, these essays were written in 1976).

17. How can a husband be a god? And if a husband can be a god then what is Selzer trying to teach us about the normal limits of humans?

18. How is Love a “profound courtesy?”