

Comprehensive Examination for Spring, 2005

Master of Arts Degree in English, Austin Peay State University

This examination is designed to test your knowledge of literature in English and critical theory as well as your analytical abilities. In each essay, develop a clear thesis and support your thesis with logical argumentation and specific evidence from relevant texts. If other evidence would seem to call your thesis into question, address that evidence. You must write an essay on at least one theory-based prompt (Prompt 3 in Part A, Prompt 3 in Part B, or Prompt 3 in Part C). This exam is designed to be written in three hours. One additional hour may be used for planning and revision.

Part A (40 minutes)

Respond to one of these prompts:

1. The Renaissance and Restoration literature frequently employs idealizations of romantic love inherited from the courtly love traditions of the Middle Ages. Equally prominent are tragic and comic inversions of idealized romantic love. First provide a basic outline of courtly love with reference to medieval literature. Then analyze two texts (Spenser, Shakespeare, Donne, Behn as possibilities) that rely upon the idealization and two texts (Shakespeare, Donne, Marvell, Wycherley as possibilities) that undermine the ideal.
2. Compare Milton's theological definition of God's plan in *Paradise Lost* to the American puritan positions of Bradstreet, Taylor, and Edwards (use 2 of the 3). How does Milton's portrayal of the fall conform to the American puritan view of the nature and potential of humans?
3. Show how Renaissance humanism manifests itself in the works of Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, and Donne (at least three of these writers); and use recent critical theory to question the implicit evaluation of "human" within Renaissance humanism. What new perceptions were revealed through humanism, and what does recent critical theory suggest concerning its limitations of perception?

Part B (40 minutes)

Respond to one of these prompts:

1. Discuss the figure of "the outside" or "the other" in works of literature written between 1700 and 1900. Since this figure is always culturally determined, trace changes in the nature and role of "the outsider" or "other" as the culture changes—that is, through different time periods and in both English and American literature. Discuss at least three texts from any genre.
2. Discuss variations and experiments in narrative point of view in works of fiction written between 1700 and 1900. Consider these developments in light of changing views about human consciousness, ways of knowing, the nature of reality, and/or the function of art during these periods. Choose at least three texts from various time frames. Obvious choices would include *Moll Flanders*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *Persuasion*, *Frankenstein*, *The Scarlet Letter*, "Bartleby the Scrivener," *Hard Times*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Daisy Miller*, or *The Awakening*, but other choices are also possible.
3. As an example of recent critical theory, Nellie McKay in *The Narrative Self: Race, Politics, and Culture in Black American Women's Autobiography*, argues that autobiography is a political act. She asserts, ". . . the personal narrative became a historical site on which aesthetics, self-confirmation of humanity, citizenship, and the significance of racial politics shaped African-American literary expression." Use three texts of the following (Franklin's *The Autobiography*, Douglass' *Narrative in the Life*, Whitman's "Song of Myself," or another autobiography of your choice) to demonstrate the contours of racial and sexual politics in the nineteenth century.

Part C (40 minutes)

Respond to one of these prompts:

1. Although we often note the prominence of decay and death in modern and postmodern literature, resurrection imagery may be seen as similarly prominent. Illustrate and explain from both prose and poetry a variety of resurrection or rebirth images whether presented in a very political context as with Wright's "Bright and Morning Star" or a more personal context as with Plath's "Lady Lazarus." Write about at least three texts.
2. Much debate has occurred as to whether realism (as it was defined at the end of the nineteenth century) has still provided the dominant mode of twentieth-century British and American literature or whether the primary movement is away from realism. Argue a position in regard to the influence of or reaction against realism, using both British and American texts.
3. In reading Modernist poets, should we focus on the political effect that the text may have, or should we ignore that effect? If, for instance, a particular poem makes a destructive ideology attractive, should we analyze the way it does so, or should we try to focus on other aspects of the poem? Discuss poems by at least three poets and the work of at least two theorists or critical schools that will illustrate the most important aspect of the question at issue.

Part D (30 minutes)

Identify or define ten of the following items. Briefly indicate the importance of each item you identify or define. Three sentences should suffice for any item.

Shadrack and National Suicide Day

bildungsroman

malapropism

Chanticleer

deconstruction

Romanticism

"For he on honey-dew hath fed,/And drunk the milk of Paradise"

trochee

formalism

Babo

naturalism

caesura

"In the swamp the banks were bare, the big cedars came together overhead, the sun did not come through, except in patches; in the fast deep water, in the half light, the fishing would be tragic."

sublime

phallogocentric

Part E (30 minutes)

Explicate one of the following poems through a careful analysis of the way its prosody and rhetoric contribute to its theme. Discuss at least two of the following: diction, imagery, metrics, form, figurative language.

We Wear the Mask

Paul Laurence Dunbar

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
 We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
 We wear the mask!

Musee des Beaux Arts

W. H. Auden

About suffering they were never wrong,
The old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position: how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:
They never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Breughel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water, and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.