

**Masters of Arts in English**  
**Comprehensive Examination Fall 2005**

*Section 1: In a full paragraph, answer ten of the following twelve questions. This section is worth 100 of 300 points, and you have one hour to complete it. You may do these in any order, but be sure to number your responses. For the two that you choose not to do, write the number and then the word “omit.”*

1. Discuss Father Jack and explain how readers could relate his character to the issues of religion and paganism in *Dancing at Lughnasa*.
2. Critical reception of *The Book of Margery Kempe* has in part stemmed from the unique glimpse it offers into the experience of a lay medieval woman. As such, hers has been considered a voice spoken from the margins. In what ways is Margery marginalized, and in what ways does she speak from somewhere closer to the center?
3. How and why does *Bleak House* satirize overseas philanthropy?
4. Readers often identify Equiano’s narrative with various genres such as the travel narrative, slave narrative, captivity narrative, or autobiography. Which do you think has the strongest claim to Equiano’s story and why?
5. Samuel Johnson complained that Samson *Agonistes*, while possessing a beginning and an end, had “no middle, since nothing passes between the first act and the last, that either hastens or delays the death of Samson.” Is this a fair criticism? You may consider this issue either in terms of plot or in terms of character—or you may combine these, or construct a different approach.
6. Name and discuss two examples of gender role inversion in *King Lear*. What are their significance in terms of characterization and cultural context?
7. Focusing mainly upon the characters of Hazel Motes and Asa Hawkes, discuss the way O’Connor ties the themes of sight and blindness to the quest for belief and personal redemption in *Wise Blood*.
8. What does Wordsworth mean by “the real language of men”?
9. Describe the ways Whitman uses grass as a symbol in “Song of Myself.”
10. In 1.2 of *King Lear*, how does Edmund redefine the “natural”? Is his plan in any way ironic? How/how not?
11. According to Dickens, what are the proper responsibilities for the middle-class woman?
12. What is the verse form of “The Ancient Mariner” and why is it important?

*Section 2: This section is worth 200 of 300 points, and you have two hours to complete it.*

In his lectures entitled *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), William James presented Walt Whitman as a “supreme example” of what he called the healthy-minded temperament. Whitman excluded from his view everything that would limit human thought and expression:

The only sentiments he allowed himself to express were of the expansive order; and he expressed these in the first person, not as your more monstrously conceited individual might so express them, but vicariously for all men, so that a passionate and mystic ontological emotion suffuses his words, and ends by persuading the reader that men and women, life and death, and all things are divinely good.

While some people are optimistic by nature, others, as a conscious act of will, embrace optimism and repudiate despair. The healthy-minded see goodness even in horror and suffering and embrace a doctrine of progress and tolerance.

In contrast to the “healthy-minded” like Whitman are those possessed of the sick soul. James says that these individuals are twice-born, once to the world, and once to spiritual salvation from the world. A person with the sick-souled temperament can never escape the idea that “there lurks a falsity” in every good he or she finds in nature:

Let sanguine healthy-mindedness do its best with its strange power of living in the moment and ignoring and forgetting, still the evil background is really there to be thought of, and the skull will grin in at the banquet.

Beset with fears of the horrors of life, the sick-souled person cries for help; “no prophet can claim to bring a final message unless he says things that will have a sound of reality in the ears of victims such as these.”

Concluding that neither temperament is sufficient in itself, James maintains that “each attitude being a syllable in human nature’s total message, it takes the whole of us to spell the meaning out completely.”

Many of the works you have read for this examination deal with suffering and the problem of evil. James’s opposition of the two temperaments can give us a way to approach the respective world views of the writers and works. For instance, is there any hope at the end of *King Lear*, or is the play the quintessential articulation of the sick soul? Or does one’s understanding of the play depend ultimately on one’s own temperament?

Using at least three different works from at least two genres, write an essay in which you explore the world views of the works from the perspective of the opposing temperaments. You must choose one work each from early British literature, later British literature, and American literature. Be sure to discuss each work in specific detail.