

Masters of Arts in English
Comprehensive Examination Fall 2006

Section 1: Answer ten of the following twelve questions, each in a full paragraph. 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. What characterizes a "good king" in *Beowulf*? Why? How do we know?

2. Each of the poems that make up *Four Quartets* is associated with one of the four elements: air, earth, water, fire. Choose one quartet and discuss how its subject matter and imagery are associated with the respective element.

3. Considering at least two marriage plots in *Middlemarch*, discuss the forces that work to produce or destroy marital harmony.

4. In *The Tower* Yeats seems to shift out of his devotion to Irish mythology and to allude to some other tradition. What is that tradition and how does he use it?

5. In what ways does *Pudd'nhead Wilson* play science and tradition off one another as forms of authority?

6. Discuss the role of education and literacy in *Fences*. You may want to consider whether the characters in the play would subscribe more to the philosophies of W.E.B. DuBois, who favored liberal arts education, or Booker T. Washington, who touted the value of vocational education for African Americans.

7. Drawing on two or three poems in *The Temple*, discuss Herbert's depiction of the human condition.

8. Discuss the concept of temperance and its importance to good governance in *Measure for Measure*.

9. In Caryl Churchill's introduction to *Cloud Nine*, she writes that the play hinges on "the parallel between colonial and sexual oppression." How effectively and persuasively do you think the play represents that "parallel"?

10. What does Yeats think about growing old? Refer to poems from at least two different collections.
11. What does *Pudd'nhead Wilson* seem to be saying about identity?
12. Is justice served at the end of *Measure for Measure*? Why or why not?

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

In “The Dry Salvages” Eliot writes of how humans have a way of “disowning the past.” We have an experience but fail to understand it; when we try to understand it retrospectively, our recollection of the experience is somehow not what it was. We gain insight into how we cover up the past by observing the suffering of those close to us. “For our own past is covered by the currents of action, / But the torments of others remains an experience / Unqualified, unworn by subsequent attrition.” We see how people adjust, how they “change and smile.” “But the agony abides” in our memory of what that person went through.

In suggesting that we come to know life best by empathizing with others, Eliot indirectly makes a strong case for the importance of literature. The texts you have read for this examination touch on the connection of empathy and understanding again and again, whether in showing us characters who feel and learn, or those who close their eyes to deny such feeling. Look, for instance, at the complex emotions that develop between Hrothgar and Beowulf, or at the callousness of Tom Driscoll in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. Or think of how Herbert presents man’s redemption as an expression of God’s empathic understanding of the human condition.

Choosing at least one work from the early British list, one from the later British, and one from the American, write an essay discussing the interplay of empathy and understanding. In making your choices, be sure to deal with at least two different genres.
