

Masters of Arts in English
Comprehensive Examination Spring 2007

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. In his treatment of *Beowulf*, critic E. Talbot Donaldson states, "Yet the potentiality—or inevitability—of sudden attack, sudden change, swift death is omnipresent in *Beowulf*; men seem to be caught in a vast web of reprisals and counterreprisals from which there is little hope of escape. This is the aspect of the poem that is apt to make the most powerful impression on the reader—its strong sense of doom." Show how this sense of doom operates in the poem.
2. In "Tradition and Individual Talent" T. S. Eliot wrote that "the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence. . . . This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional." How does the fourth poem in *Four Quartets* ("Little Gidding") exemplify this "historical sense"?
3. Many of the poems in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* develop Yeats's attitude towards Irish Nationalism in the crucial years after the Easter Rising of 1916. Discuss this attitude as evidenced in that volume.
4. One critic calls *Pudd'nhead Wilson* Mark Twain's "most sustained engagement with the institution of slavery." How would you characterize Twain's treatment of slavery in the novel?
5. Upon first glance, female characters in *Fences* may appear to be secondary characters in the play, but in actuality it can be argued that they play a pivotal role in propelling the action of the play. Pick at least two female characters in the play and argue for or against their centrality.
6. According to George Herbert's biographer Izaak Walton, Herbert claimed that readers of the *The Temple* would find "a picture of the many spiritual Conflicts that have past betwixt God and my soul." Drawing specifically on a few poems in *The Temple*, support or refute this claim.
7. How is honor variously defined by the characters of *Measure for Measure*? What definitions are seemingly privileged by the play and what social commentary might that reflect?
8. Churchill's *Cloud Nine* tackles numerous aspects of British life and culture in the imperial Victorian as well as post-imperial contemporary periods, particularly as related to gender, sexuality, religion, race, and empire. Choose an issue relevant to one of these broad social areas and analyze Churchill's presentation of it in the play.
9. At the end of Chapter 21, the narrator of *Middlemarch* remarks, "we are all of us born in moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves." How does the novel illustrate this condition? Which characters emerge from it, and how?
10. While *Beowulf* is a narrative dominated by men, women appear in the poem at various points and in different roles. How would you describe the influence of women in this poem?
11. Each of the poems that make up *Four Quartets* is associated with a religious figure: God the Father, God the Son, Virgin Mary, Holy Ghost. Choose one quartet and discuss how it is associated with the respective religious figure.

12. In African American and many ethnic literary traditions, the trickster is a figure who usually acts dimwitted, docile, and ignorant, but in actuality is just the opposite—sharp, shrewd, and quick-witted. Trickster figures often transgress boundaries of social custom and governing laws of behavior, collapsing boundaries of oppression and control and setting precedence for future communal action. In what ways might Troy Maxson connect to the trickster tradition?

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

In *Truth and Method* Hans-Georg Gadamer maintains that “the mode of being of literature has something unique and incomparable about it.” Key to this uniqueness is the written word:

The written word and what partakes of it—literature—is the intelligibility of mind transferred to the most alien medium. Nothing is so purely the trace of the mind as writing, but also nothing is so dependent on the understanding mind. In its deciphering and interpretation a miracle takes place: the transformation of something strange and dead into a total simultaneity and familiarity. This is like nothing else that has come down to us from the past. The remnants of the life of the past, what is left of buildings, tools, the contents of graves, are weather-beaten by the storms of time that have swept over them, whereas a written tradition, when deciphered and read, is to such an extent pure mind that it speaks to us as if in the present. That is why the capacity to read, to understand what is written, is like a secret art, even a magic that looses and binds us. In it time and space seem to be suspended. The man who is able to read what has been handed down in writing testifies to and achieves the sheer presence of the past.

As you have read the works and prepared for this exam, you surely have felt the power of this miracle. Wiglaf’s scornful rebuke of the cowardly Geats fills every reader with indignation against them, despite how removed we are from the warrior ethos of Anglo-Saxon times. And at the end of *Fences*, mindful of all that Troy has experienced in his times (which are, after all not quite our own), don’t we somehow know him and understand him? We could go on and on with examples of this kind of simultaneity or familiarity.

But how can we be sure in experiencing this “sheer presence of the past” we aren’t somehow falsifying the past? It’s hard enough to know the experiences of people who share our lives, let alone those of a 17th century English priest like George Herbert. And isn’t part of the pleasure of reading works like *Beowulf* or *Middlemarch* the respite they give us from the present? Don’t we appreciate the “pastness” of the past?

Your assignment for this essay is to harmonize two quite different claims for literature. The first is Gadamer’s idea that reading enables us to transcend time. The other is the thought that what makes literature truly valuable is the record it gives us of other times and other minds. You could say that what you’ll be doing in this essay is thinking about the works you’ve read both from a universal and a particular perspective. Both perspectives are important, but which do you think is most meaningful? Or is it possible that some works are more important in one way than they are in the other? Or is this just a false dichotomy?

In framing your essay, be sure to write about at least three works from your list—one each from early British, later British, and American. Be sure also to discuss works from at least two literary genres.