

**Masters of Arts in English
Comprehensive Examination**

Spring 2009

Section 1: *In a full paragraph, answer ten of the following twelve questions. This section is worth 100 of 300 points. 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. To what extent and in what ways does *The Duchess of Malfi* argue in favor of social mobility?
2. Dickinson writes often about death in her poetry, sometimes even taking on the persona of a person who has died. Discuss how the theme of mortality informs her work.
3. Do you believe Defoe presents Moll Flanders as a product of nature or of nurture? Is she fated to her life of crime because she is “the true daughter of an infamous mother” (as Mr. Rochester says about Bertha Mason in the novel *Jane Eyre*)? Or is her life of crime due to her low social standing? What are the implications for social critique in the view that you choose?
4. Seamus Heaney's "bog poems" are often interpreted as Heaney's response to "The Troubles" agitating Northern Ireland in the 1970s. Given this political context, how do the bogs in these poems function symbolically?
5. Does *Vanity Fair* fulfill the promise of its subtitle, "A Novel without a Hero"?
6. How do the men in *The Duchess of Malfi* attempt to control the Duchess's sexual agency and what concerns spur their efforts? Should we see these actions as protective? Tyrannical? Successful?
7. Discuss the distinction between “happening-truth” and “story-truth” that O’Brien delineates in *The Things They Carried*. What does he mean by each? Which for him is “truer”? How does the book itself illustrate this distinction?
8. Comment on the formal choices that Dickinson makes in her poetry. Where do these formal choices derive from and how were they influential on later American literature? Are there ways that form underscores content in her poetry?
9. Discuss how *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* can be read as an example of the Theatre of the Absurd.

10. Comment on the Appendix that Frederick Douglass adds to his *Narrative*. Why would he want to clarify his views on Christianity? Judging from both the *Narrative* proper and the Appendix, how would you characterize his religious views?

11. The central narrative of the *Book of the Duchess* includes abbreviated versions of familiar narratives, such as the story of Seys and Alcyone, the *Romance of the Rose*, and the Trojan War. Select one of these narratives and describe the role it plays in the larger narrative.

12. Describe some of the different forms of vanity that are satirized in *Vanity Fair*. Is there a consistent failing that unites them all?

Section 2: *This section is worth 200 of 300 points.*

Relationships between the genders play a key role from the earliest to the most contemporary works on our reading list. In Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Book of the Duchess*, Queen Alcyone mourns the loss of King Cyex and the Black Knight mourns his dead, virtuous Lady White. Rat Kiley, in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, proclaims his love for Mary Anne Bell and nine-year-old Tim feels a love for his fourth-grade classmate Linda that is "as deep and rich as love can ever get" (228).

But Rat Kiley also admonishes his fellow soldiers for viewing women stereotypically: "You got these blinders on about women. How gentle and peaceful they are. All that crap about how if we had a pussy for president there wouldn't be no more wars. Pure garbage. You got to get rid of that sexist attitude" (107). And characters like Moll Flanders and Becky Sharpe are certainly strong-minded women, who scheme and seem to use men to get what they want, while a poet like Dickinson can perhaps be read as declaring her independence from men altogether.

Using at least three different works from at least two different genres, write an essay in which you analyze the authors' presentations of gender and gender relationships. Among other things, you might consider whether these authors reinforce or subvert traditional gender roles, what they have to say about social constructions of gender, and/or how considerations of race and class shape gender attitudes. You must choose one work from pre-1800 British literature, one from post-1800 British literature, and one from American literature.

Note: the discussion of poets on the list would best be served if more than one poem were included in the analysis.