

**M. A. Comprehensive Exam
January 2013**

Develop analytic essays in response to any four of the following questions, choosing works from the M. A. reading list that best address the questions and that demonstrate your familiarity with a range of periods, genres, and national literatures.

- *Please restrict your essays to the 5-7 page limit per answer (double spaced, one inch margins, 10- to 12- point print font such as Times New Roman).*
- *Do not focus substantial attention on the same text twice.*
- *Paste and attach your questions in a return e-mail to Emily Hiesl in a document form, including doc, docx, rtf, or pdf. Please do NOT write your name anywhere on your attachment.*
- *Guidelines are attached.*
- *Back up your work.*

1. Choose one of the works of literary theory from the M.A. reading list, and discuss, using particular passages from the text, your understanding of the benefit or purpose of this theoretical approach. Then discuss the openings it provides for understanding two literary works from the reading list, chosen from two different historical/national categories.

2. Mary Rowlandson wrote her narrative of captivity at a remove of six years from the experience of being taken from Lancaster, Massachusetts. Write an essay that considers in depth the choices Rowlandson made in retrospectively shaping her narrative (literary form, language, narrative line, named and unnamed characters, references to other texts, etc.) and the way those choices served to render her experience accessible—and politically and emotionally affecting—to her anticipated readers. Who would those intended readers have been? To what uses might they have put the text? What new possibilities for reading have emerged in the present day of your own encounter with this text?

3. In *Sensational Designs*, Jane Tompkins historicizes and interrogates the concept of literary “value.” In so doing, she “revalues” marginalized literary texts by a new set of criteria. Discuss Tompkins’ project, both as she defines it in her introduction and through specific examples from at least one of her book chapters. Also work to situate Tompkins’ project in the larger context of English Studies as you currently understand it, by putting her line of inquiry into conversation with one or more theoretical texts from the reading list (*e.g.* any texts listed under “Criticism, Theory, and Poetics”).

4. According to Jane Austen, "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife." The tension between "romantic" ideals and "social/economic" reality informs many centuries of literature. Examine the treatment of love and marriage in their personal and social contexts in two or three works (novels, plays, poems) from different periods. How do these treatments comment upon or reflect the cultural (and/or aesthetic) values of their respective periods? You may frame your discussion with a theoretical work and treat two works of literature if you like.

5. In his book *The Sounds of Poetry*, Robert Pinsky argues that "to hear free verse and to write it effectively, is a demanding skill. In that sense, all true poetry is 'formal': the form in some cases is based on a measure, in other cases it is not." Selecting carefully from the M.A. reading list, please compare and contrast two "traditional" poems in closed forms with two free verse poems in open forms in order to demonstrate your sense of the usefulness of Pinsky's assertion.

6. As scholars working on critical pieces, we often find ourselves, consciously or not visiting a "stable" of critical theories so as to trot out a particular theory to apply to our interpretation of this or that literary text. But Nabokov's *Pale Fire's* obsessive interest in and relentless satire of the theoretical-critical "machine" suggests that other (a)venues for interpretation may be open to us: in particular, "fiction itself" can constitute a theory of interpretation.

With this in mind, first please explore how *Pale Fire* could be read so as to constitute a form of literary theory, and then choose one of the two following (a)venues: (a) use *Pale Fire* as the key to interpreting and critiquing any other literary text on the M.A. reading list; (b) use *Pale Fire* as the key to interpreting and critiquing any other theoretical text on the M.A. reading list.

7. Drawing on two or three texts from different periods, cultures, or genres on the M.A. reading list, write an essay on the "wild" or "monstrous" in literature. Draw some implications from the different representations of literal and/or figurative wildness, wilderness, and/or monstrosity, but discuss as well how each depiction reflects the time or context of its original publication. That is, historicize your examples but also comment on how they speak to us today.

8. In "Italians and Others," Ann Rosalind Jones says that "The Italy of English playwrights from the 1580s on was not a geographer's record but a fantasy setting for dramas of passion, Machiavellian politics, and revenge—a landscape of the mind." This Italy "was another country, constructed through a lens of voyeuristic curiosity through which writers and their audiences explored what was forbidden in their own culture" (*Renaissance Drama* 18, 1987). Was it all that different in later centuries? Write an essay that compares the use of European otherness in two of the following authors: Webster, Radcliffe, and James. Do you see a marked contrast between the imaginary structures at work in these texts and the "orientalism" diagnosed and analyzed by Said?

9. Composition theory in the 1980s is often described as having followed a “social turn” away from cognitivism and process theories of writing and toward social construction and a “post-process” pedagogy. Explain your understanding of the “social turn” in composition theory, and with cogent reference to at least three of the composition theory articles on our reading list, explain how these authors explore the “social turn” and where it takes them in terms of specific pedagogical practices. Does the idea of social construction retain useful explanatory and pedagogical power? Why or why not?

10. In the *Canterbury Tales*, characters are allowed to “speak for themselves.” The Wife of Bath’s lusty ramblings, the Pardoner’s compulsive self-confession, the Miller’s sub-literate parodies of romance—all, to a certain extent, allow the characters to tell their stories in their own voices, with their own emphases. In this act of creating a plausible fiction that allows many voices to speak, Chaucer opens up a new world of possibilities for subsequent authors. The dark side of this diversity of voices, however, lies in the process of standardization of English. As a standard orthography and a prestige dialect become established for English, the result in fiction is the proliferation of marginalized characters who speak in non-standard English. More often than not, these voices are made to look ridiculous, or at least uneducated, by the author. Write an essay in which you engage two or three texts on this issue (authorial use of standard and nonstandard English to depict characters), at least one of which must be the *Canterbury Tales*, *Bartholomew Fair*, or the work of the New London Group.

11. Greek in origin, the “elegy” has changed as aesthetic and cultural contexts have changed. When Virginia Woolf was writing *To the Lighthouse*, her search for a new form led her to consider “elegy” as a candidate for replacing the “novel.”

I am making up “To the Lighthouse” . . . I have an idea that I will invent a new name for my books to supplant “novel.” A new ----- by Virginia Woolf. But what? Elegy?

Why might Virginia Woolf consider calling her works “elegies” rather than novels? Write about the interpretation of the elegy in *To the Lighthouse* and in one other author on your M.A. reading list. Discuss the traditional elegy and ways in which the works you choose conform to elegiac conventions and deviate from the traditional elegy.