

Ph.D. Field Examination

Nineteenth-Century British Literature

*** SPECIALIZATION: 1845-1900 ***

November 2002

INSTRUCTIONS

This examination has three sections defined by time period:

Part A: 1790-1845

Part B: 1845-1900

Part C: 1790-1900

During the four hours of this examination, please answer ONE question from each of the three sections.

The question in your area of specialization is worth 40% of your total mark. The other two questions are each worth 30% of your total mark.

If you focus on a particular author in one question, you cannot focus on that author in any other question unless instructed otherwise. Your answers should have a clear thesis and demonstrate both familiarity with the texts themselves and knowledge of debates and issues in the field.

SECTION A: 1790-1845 (worth 30% of your total mark)

1. In one of his letters Keats contrasts the “Wordsworthian or egotistical sublime” (where the self and its emotions, ideas, memories and experiences are central to the poetic experience) with his own sense that the poet should have no self, no character, no individuality, and thus should possess “negative capability”. Discuss the tension between these two positions in the works of at least three authors of the period.
2. Literature in this period frequently represents the experience of the poor, the dispossessed, the homeless, or the rejected, and often makes them into the moral or spiritual centre of the work. Discuss in relation to the works of at least three authors of the period, at least one poet and one prose (fiction or non-fiction) writer.
3. Trace the gothic elements (e.g. the supernatural and transcendent, the grotesque, the unconscious) in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and at least one prose (fiction or non-fiction) writer and one other poet.

Section B: 1845-1900 (worth 40% of your total mark)

1. A debate between faith and doubt occupied the attention of major and minor writers of the period. Sketch in aspects of that debate, beginning with John Henry Newman and extending your discussion to at least two other authors, one a novelist and one a poet.

2. Raymond Williams has claimed that the flowering of fiction which took place in the mid-to-late-nineteenth century is the result of a "crisis of the knowable community." Novels and other works of fiction in this period, he claims, struggle to bridge the gaps between the sense of the knowable (relations with individuals) and the unknowable (changing social, political, and economic relations, both in Britain and around the world). Discuss the validity of Williams' argument in reference to the prose or poetic fiction of three writers of the period.

3. William A. Cohen writes that "sexual unspeakability" in Victorian literature is not simply a "collection of prohibitions." Rather, prohibitions governing the representation of sexuality and sexual situations afford Victorian writers "abundant opportunities to develop an elaborate discourse -- richly ambiguous, subtly coded, prolix and polyvalent -- that we now recognize and designate by the very term literary. Like other restrictions upon expression, the conventions of sexual unspeakability serve writers as a productive constraint, contributing to a certain historical formation of the literary." Considering Cohen's comments, examine the representation of sexuality in works by three authors of the Victorian period.

Section C: 1790-1900 (worth 30% of your total mark)

Note: In your answer to this section, you must focus on at least one author from Section A and at least one author from Section B.

1. Compare the prosody of Wordsworth and Coleridge to that of G. M. Hopkins.
2. Victorian writers frequently thought of themselves as inheritors of a Romantic tradition in literature. Trace the development (or warping) of a Romantic theme or idea from one Romantic writer to two Victorian heirs.
3. The French Revolution commenced a period of intense discussion of social, economic, religious and political liberty. What was the literary response to one or more of these issues? Consider one prose writer (such as Matthew Arnold), one novelist (such as Charles Dickens), and one poet (such as E.B. Browning).