

# Twentieth-Century British Literature Field Examination

Spring 1998

## DIRECTIONS

The examination consists of three parts of equal value:

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| Part I.   | Twentieth-Century British Literature to 1950    |
| Part II.  | Twentieth-Century British Literature after 1950 |
| Part III. | The Period as a Whole                           |

You are to answer three questions, one from each part of the examination.

Plan to demonstrate both the scope and depth of your knowledge of twentieth-century British literature. The purpose of this examination is not to discover what you do not know about the period but to allow you to demonstrate the breadth and depth of your knowledge. Demonstrate knowledge of prose, poetry, and drama in the examination as a whole, though not necessarily in each question. In this semester's examination, a question may mention a specific theorist as a means of contextualizing the question, but you are under no obligation to refer to that theorist in your answer. In each question, you may, but need not, address more than one text by each author discussed.

We recommend that you spend approximately one hour planning your answers and three hours writing. Spend time planning not only the individual answers but also the whole examination.

**Part I: Twentieth-Century British Literature to 1950**

Answer **one** of the following questions.

1. A principal commonplace of contemporary theory and criticism is everydayness. The writers of the early twentieth century were also much concerned with the everyday. The Modernist everyday was presumably the trope of the rational and the common, but it was much estranged or haunted, rendered uncanny or *unheimlich* (in Freud's German: unhomely) by the irrational and uncommon. Discuss how **three authors** from the Reading List to 1950 represent the everyday.
2. "The continuity-discontinuity antimony is permanent," writes William Everdell in *The First Moderns*, "but the heart of Modernism is the postulate of ontological discontinuity." Although Everdell clearly decides in favour of discontinuity, the general antimony he identifies is central to the texts of the early twentieth century. Discuss the relation between discontinuity and continuity in the textual practice of **three authors** from the Reading List to 1950.
3. "In dreams," wrote W.B. Yeats, "begin responsibilities." A central matter of public debate in the early twentieth century was the relation between the autonomy and the responsibilities of art. Autonomy and responsibility have variously been figured as the aesthetic and the ethical, the utopic and the ideological, etc.. Discuss how **three authors** from the Reading List to 1950 negotiated this relation.

**Part II: Twentieth-Century British Literature after 1950**

Answer one of the following questions.

1. Judith Butler has argued that gender is performative, the result of a “reiterative . . . practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names. . . . [T]he regulatory norms of ‘sex’ work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and, more specifically, to materialize the body’s sex, to materialize sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative.” Discuss the ways in which **three authors** from the Reading List after 1950 address the relationship between masculinity (in men and/or women) and the heterosexual imperative.
2. During the latter half of the century, a number of writers (such as some of the members of “the Movement”) appear notably anti-Modernist, criticizing and avoiding what they saw as Modernist experimental techniques and exclusiveness. In contrast, postmodern writing is seen not as being vehemently anti-Modernist, but as being in part a continuation of the Modernist inquiry into various philosophical, sociopolitical, and aesthetic concerns. Addressing **three authors** from the Reading List after 1950, discuss differences between writing that you would define as anti-Modernist and writing that you would define as postmodernist.
3. Much British literature written after 1950 focuses on national identities that are non-British. Some even suggest that nationhood is not defined by geography at all, but by the similarity of individuals’ histories (racial, sexual, gendered, class-based, etc.). Analyse representations of “nationality,” defined however broadly, in works by **three authors** from the Reading List after 1950, taking into account the sociohistorical context in which these works were written.

**Part III: The Period as a Whole**

Answer **one** of the following questions. Address authors from both halves of the twentieth century. Do not address authors that you have discussed in your answers to Parts I and II of this examination.

1. "Historiographic metafiction" refers to works which lay claim to historical events and personages, yet are also self-reflexive, questioning the assumed foundations on which notions of historical truth and cultural values are based. "Historiographic metafiction" is a postmodern term, but literature *throughout* the twentieth century has simultaneously critiqued and depended on history. Compare historiographic metafictional elements in works by **three authors**.
2. Two aspects of the cultural tradition Henri Focillon has called "centurial mysticism" are that the one hundred years numbered as a century form an especially significant whole and that the first and last years mark exceptional thresholds in historical time. Although these two aspects may or may not apply to the twentieth century or to any other period, the twentieth century, nonetheless, like all periods, has had significant thresholds, significant events of change and transformation. Some of these have been large and public: wars, rebellions, etc.; some have been smaller and more private: changes in mores, social identity, etc.. Discuss how **three authors** have represented and responded to these kinds of changes in the twentieth century in their work.
3. Migration has been one of the great themes of twentieth-century British Literature. As much as the nineteenth century, this century has witnessed massive migrations out of, into, and within the British Isles. At the same time, the literature remains rooted in nation, region, shire, parish, neighbourhood, and home. Discuss how **three authors** have represented this struggle between migration and rootedness.