

Department of English

Area Examination

American Literature

May 2008

INSTRUCTIONS

The exam has two parts.

The first, PART A, consists of two essay questions addressing texts on your A-list.
The second, PART B, consists of one essay question addressing texts on your B-list.

Each essay will be weighed equally in the evaluation of the exam.

PART A:

Choose **two** of the following questions. Each directs you to discuss three writers for a total of six writers discussed in Part A. Note the following restrictions:

Of the six, at least two must have written before 1900 and at least two must have written after 1900. In addition, at least two must be poets and at least two must be writers of prose.

1. "American literature is preeminently a modern literature." Explain with reference to three texts on your A-list, including at least one from before 1900.
2. In *Playing in the Dark* (1990), Toni Morrison argues that "The contemplation of [a] black presence is central to any understanding of our national literature and should not be permitted to hover at the margins the literary imagination." Evaluate Morrison's claim and explore its significance to our understanding of three texts on your A list.
3. The American philosopher William James gave us the notion of the "stream-of-consciousness." Write an essay explaining how and to what extent this now ubiquitous notion remains useful for reading American literature. Focus your discussion on the work of three authors chosen from your A list.
4. "The avant-garde," writes Lyn Hejinian in *My Life*, "is always pedagogical." With reference to three writers on your A list, explain how this claim might be true of American literature generally.
5. Leslie Fiedler famously observed that American literature is about the hero's flight from "sex, marriage, and responsibility"—that is, the domestic. Discuss the place of the domestic, keeping mind Fiedler's observation, in the work of three writers on your A list. Select works that represent an array of ideological positions.
6. For many critics, Emerson is the fount of American literary writing. Write an essay on the importance of Emerson (you may choose to find the idea of his importance problematic) and his presence in two later writers from your A list, including at least one from the 20th century.
7. In 1950, Henry Nash Smith observed that "one of the most persistent generalizations concerning American life and character is the notion that our society has been shaped by the pull of a vacant continent drawing population westward." Discuss Smith's claim evaluating it in light of recent cultural and/or critical shifts in attitude toward "the frontier."
8. Is there a women's tradition in American writing? Discuss the question with reference to three writers on your A list.

PART B: Dickinson, Her Culture and Contemporaries

Choose **one** of the following. Your answer should focus on three writers from your B-list.

1. Discuss the idea of the sentimental, recently recuperated and developed in Americanist criticism, as it bears upon the poetry of Emily Dickinson and two other poets on your B list.
2. Write an essay on the ways in which historicist or contextual criticism is variously productive or reductive for reading lyric poetry of the 2nd half of the 19th century. Focus your answer on three poets from your B list.
3. Discuss the significance of Emily Dickinson's style (rhyme, meter, syntax, punctuation, and so on) comparing it with the style of two other poets on your B list.
4. What happened to the reputation of many of the writers on your B list? Dickinson, obscure in her lifetime, has become the preeminent figure. Write an essay explaining the shift in critical, cultural, or literary values necessary to make this happen. Discuss Dickinson and two writers on your B list.