

**Department of English**

**Field Examination**

**American Literature**

**November 2005**

**INSTRUCTIONS**

The exam has two parts.

The first consists of two essay questions, the second of one.

Each essay will be weighed equally in evaluating 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. Ezra Pound, it has been suggested, wanted to make literature, especially poetry, safe for men after what Ann Douglas called the “feminization of American culture” in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Frank Lentricchia has written on Wallace Stevens’s “young manhood” with similar concerns in mind. Clearly, the question of masculinity would be a fraught one for Modernist poetry. Write an essay examining the ways in which a masculine imperative shaped 20<sup>th</sup>-century poets’ response to their “sentimental” forefathers and mothers. Discuss three poets, one of whom may represent the 19<sup>th</sup> century.
2. The imperial confidence in American literature displayed in books like Hugh Kenner’s *A Homemade World* (1975) was in fact slow to develop. Examine three touchstone works from your A-list that contributed to, or that reflect, this developing confidence, placing them in a larger narrative of American literary history.
3. According to some critics, slavery constitutes the root metaphor of all great American literature. Even those works that do not deal explicitly with race relations cannot escape slavery’s shadow. With reference to three authors, reflect on the usefulness of this idea to literary criticism.
4. 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 any periods of American literature.
5. “By the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, New England was a dense, settled culture, bookish, largely led by its ministers, in relatively close contact with English and European thought” (Ruland and Bradbury). It was also a culture on the edge of wilderness, a vast land mass that would gradually be appropriated both politically and imaginatively over the next 200 years. Discuss the implications of this singular position for the future of an American literature just then beginning to develop. Focus your discussion on the work of three writers.
6. In 1978, Adrienne Rich published a book called *The Dream of a Common Language*. Show how that utopian dream is classically American in two ways: it plays a central role in works of American literature that self-consciously expound an American vision; and it frequently appears as the manifestation of an exclusive, even separatist, enterprise within American culture. Discuss three writers.
7. “The avant-garde,” writes Lyn Hejinian, “is always pedagogical.” With reference to three writers, explain how this claim might also be true of American literature generally.

## **PART B: American Modernist Fiction**

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

1. Explain how “making it new,” in Ezra Pound’s phrase, contributed to the commercial success and/or the canonization of fiction published during the Modern period. Discuss three works.
2. The Harlem Renaissance was a popular movement that incorporated the innovations of Modernist writing. Write an essay that explains this achievement in part by examining the “Modernist,” “popular,” and hybrid elements of three texts from your B-list. (One of the three texts you choose may be a Modernist work that was not part of the Harlem Renaissance.)
3. Focussing on three works, explain the significance for American Modernism of the figure of the outsider or lone hero/heroine, and compare the ways in which this figure is handled in Modernist fiction and popular fiction.
4. The First World War shaped a generation of American fiction writers. Correlate the historical event of “The Great War” with the literary-aesthetic energies/sensibilities of three authors who thematized it in their work.
5. Drawing on the work of three writers from your B-list, discuss the way that “masculinity” as traditionally rendered is reconfigured in Modernist fiction.