

2202441 British Fiction from the Twentieth Century to the Present
Semester II, 2019
Tuesday, May 5, 2020
Final Examination Practice

The practice exam is three hours long, with ten to fifteen minutes for thinking and proofreading for each of the three parts included.

Part I: Inside the Definitions (40 minutes) Engage with definitions presented in **three** of the following nineteen excerpts. Point out a particular definition of something that you see in the passage and offer your critique of it. Do you agree with the idea that is suggested? What assumptions, sound or weak, lie behind that concept? Explain briefly what you take issue with or what you approve of: the meaning given, the way the meaning is given, the implications of such a meaning, etc.?

1. How, then, can the novel, the subtlest and most flexible form of human expression, die? Literature is concerned with the self-conscious exploration of the lives of men, women and children in society. Even when it is comic, it sees life as something worth talking about. This is why airport fiction, or ‘blockbusters’, books which are all plot, can never be considered literature, and why, in the end, they are of little value. It is not only that the language in which they are written lacks bounce and poignancy, but that they don’t return the reader to the multifariousness and complication of existence. This, too, is why journalism and literature are opposed to one another, rather than being allies. Most journalism is about erasing personality in favour of the facts, or the ‘story’. The personality of the journalist is unimportant. In literature personality is all, and the exploration of character, or portraiture, the human subject—is central to it.
(Hanif Kureishi, “Something Given: Reflections on Writing” p. 8)
2. Eva turned to my father and bowed to him, Japanese fashion. ‘My good and deep friend Haroon here, he will show us the Way. The Path.’
‘Jesus fucking Christ,’ I whispered to Charlie, remembering how Dad couldn’t even find his way to Beckenham.
(Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia* chapter 1 p. 12–13)
3. The variety and intensity of literary production on the British islands in the 1990s testifies to a sense of disorientation that is both aesthetic and political. Aesthetic, in that the customary templates of, for instance, Black British writing and working-class fiction had lost traction, and the protocols of postmodernity often proved stale upon arrival. Political, in that the ascent of neoliberalism was, for most of the decade, not yet consolidated as a Third Way one could confidently join or oppose, and was more often celebrated for its role in revitalising Britain’s creative industries than criticised for furthering the erosion of the post-war consensus.
(Pieter Vermeulen, “The 1990s” p. 44)
4. A man is the history of his breaths and thoughts, acts, atoms and wounds, love indifference and dislike; also of his race and nation, the soil that fed him and his forebears, the stones and sands of his familiar places, long-silenced battles and struggles of conscience, of the smiles of girls and the slow utterance of old women, of accidents and the gradual action of inexorable law, of all this and something else too, a single flame which in every way obeys the laws that pertain to Fire itself, and yet is

lit and put out from one moment to the next, and can never be relumed in the whole waste of time to come.

(A. S. Byatt, *Possession* p. 12)

5. Val's papers were bland and minimal, in large confident handwriting, well laid out. "Male Ventriloquism" was judged to be good work and discounted by the examiners as probably largely by Roland, which was doubly unjust, since he had refused to look at it, and did not agree with its central proposition, which was that Randolph Henry Ash neither liked nor understood women, that his female speakers were constructs of his own fear and aggression, that even the poem-cycle, *Ask to Embla*, was the work not of love but of narcissism, the poet addressing his Anima. (No biographical critic had ever satisfactorily identified Embla.) Val did very badly. Roland had supposed she had expected this, but it became dreadfully obvious that she had not. There were tears, night-long, choked, whimpering tears, and the first tantrum.

(A. S. Byatt, *Possession* p. 16)

6. "That pretentious blond bombshell" she said of him. "That pretentious sexpot." She liked to use sexist wolf-whistle words as a kind of boomerang. This embarrassed Roland, since Fergus transcended any such terminology; he was indeed blond, and he was indeed sexually very successful, and that was an end to it. He came to no more meals, and Roland feared Fergus thought this was a function of his, Roland's, resentment.

(A. S. Byatt, *Possession* p. 18)

7. He had shown Ash, whom he had met previously in Paris, sitting at his desk, in a three-quarters profile, in a carved mahogany chair. Behind him was a kind of triptych with ferny foliage, to the left and right, enclosing a watery space in which rosy and silver fish shone between pondweeds. The effect was partly to set the poet amongst the roots of a wood or forest, until, as Mortimer Cropper had pointed out, one realised that the background was one of those compartmentalised Wardian cases, in which the Victorians grew plants in controlled environments, or created self-sustaining ponds, in order to study the physiology of plants and fishes.

(A. S. Byatt, *Possession* p. 20)

8. It is the case that, since the late 1990s, technology has made very different forms of fictional narrative acts possible beyond the conventional form of the book, but the digital novel—in the form of either a straightforward ebook or in terms of novels which utilise the flexibility of the digital to stretch the link between novel and book—has not really yet taken off, and remains a tiny part of the market in comparison to conventional books.

(Leigh Wilson, "Post-Millennial Literature" p. 48)

9. We speak the purest English here in the whole country. It is because of the vowel sounds and what happened to them when Gaelic speakers were made to speak English after the 1745 rebellion and the 1746 defeat when Gaelic was stamped out and punishable by death, and then all the local girls married the incoming English-speaking soldiers.

(Ali Smith, *Girl Meets Boy* p. 54–55)

10. (My sister would be banned in schools if she was a book.)

(Ali Smith, *Girl Meets Boy* p. 61)

11. It's raining quite heavily when we make love again and afterwards I can hear the rhythmic drip, heavy and steady, from the place above the window where the drainpipe is blocked. The rhythm of it goes against, and at the same time makes a kind of sense of, the randomness of the rain happening all round it.
I never knew how much I liked rain till now.
(Ali Smith, *Girl Meets Boy* p. 139)
12. One afternoon Old Joe Hunt, as if picking up Adrian's earlier challenge, asked us to debate the origins of the First World War: specifically, the responsibility of Archduke Franz Ferdinand's assassin for starting the whole thing off. Back then, we were most of us absolutists. We liked Yes v. No, Praise v. Blame, Guilt v. Innocence—or, in Marshall's case, Unrest v. Great Unrest. We liked a game that ended in a win and loss, not a draw. And so for some, the Serbian gunman, whose name is long gone from my memory, had one hundred per cent individual responsibility: take him out of the equation, and the war would never have happened. Others preferred the one hundred per cent responsibility of historical forces, which had placed the antagonistic nations on an inevitable collision course: "Europe was a powder keg waiting to blow," and so on. The more anarchic, like Colin, argued that everything was down to chance, that the world existed in a state of perpetual chaos, and only some primitive storytelling instinct, itself doubtless a hangover from religion, retrospectively imposed meaning on what might or might not have happened.
(Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* p. 10–11)
13. 'You've lost your hair,' she said.
'It happens. At least it shows I'm not an alcoholic.'
(Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* p. 90)
14. Remorse, etymologically, is the action of biting again: that's what the feeling does to you. Imagine the strength of the bite when I reread my words.
(Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* p. 138)
15. Sometimes I feel young and sometimes I feel old and sometimes I feel both at the same time. This trick of being in two minds, of weighing things on the one hand and then again on the other, has never been a problem for me. But, while I can hold two warring ideas in my head at the same time, and even retain a clear idea of what it is I am thinking about, I am sometimes less sure of who or what it is that is doing the thinking. This weightlessness takes hold of me, this sense that somehow I am lacking essential ballast. I suspect it's one of the gifts of my generation, a generation becalmed in adolescence, a generation with nothing in its head or its heart and with too much time on its hands.
(Mike McCormack, "Of One Mind" p. 403)
16. Emmanuel and Rosie danced two more dances before Emmanuel led Rosie over to where Attila was sitting. She looked at him without recognition, but with a faint, dazed smile. Her cheeks were coloured by the exertion and she was beautiful. When she sat down he handed her the box of New Berry Fruits which she received graciously and when he opened the box helped herself to two of the sweets and stuffed them into one cheek.
(Aminatta Forna, *Happiness* chapter 8 p. 123)

17. She began to point out streets with restaurants and food shops, churchyards and hidden squares, until one of the women parking attendants stopped her and said in a gentle voice: 'These are our streets, we know them.'
(Aminatta Forna, *Happiness* chapter 9 p. 127)
18. Then she closed her eyes and kept them closed, until, following the long seconds of her climax, she opened them and the blackness of the pupils gave Attila, who had watched her face throughout, the momentary impression that her eyes had changed colour. He felt a drop of sweat fall from his forehead and saw it land upon hers like a drop of silver.
(Aminatta Forna, *Happiness* chapter 17 p. 254)
19. She has a habit of speaking slowly and precisely to me—she thinks it's the right way to talk to a deaf person.
(Maxine Sinclair, "Falling on Deaf Ears")

Part II: The Academic and the Literary (40 minutes) Write a conversation between three characters from at least two different works. They are discussing Britain. What is the landscape and literary-landscape of the United Kingdom that might be debated among them?

Part III: Textual Investigation (60 minutes) Answer one of the following two prompts.

1. Eros, or as Finn variously calls it, sex, love, and the erotic principle, is a god in Greek mythology and one of two drives in the phenomena of life in Freudian theory. Discuss how two works in the latter half of the semester represent this life force. Consider, for instance: Is it true that contemporary works present sex more explicitly than earlier ones? How do the different senses and associations of Eros intertwined or differentiated in the stories? What taboos are explored and how? What values or myths about love, intercourse, desire, or the erotic are perpetuated and how?
2. Men have dominated British fiction from its beginnings, and in our course, certainly in much of the twentieth century, not only as writers but also as protagonists and supporting figures. Look at the male characters in at least two of the post-midterm works we have read and examine their portrayal. How far have men come? Have their roles and types changed in three decades? How so and how not?