

College of Letters  
Wesleyan University

Junior Comprehensive Examination, Spring Term 2009

Examiners: Carolyn Dean, Brown University  
Larry Scanlon, Rutgers University

Over three days you will have the chance to think and write about the texts you have read dealing with ancient, medieval, and twentieth-century culture. Please pick **two** of each of the questions listed for each day. Please think both analytically and creatively in your answers, and feel free to use examples that range across the various periods you have studied. The more detailed you can be in your responses when it comes to historical specifics such as names, dates, and places, the better; yet each of your answers should have an overall, coherent argument.

Feel free to consult the specific texts as you write up your responses.

Please refer to the guidelines for specific word limit, deadline, and formatting instructions. Be sure to include your name and the exam day. Write no more than 1800 words on each question, approximately six double-spaced pages. Be sure your word processor numbers the pages.

### **I. Examination Day One: Human, All Too Human**

1. The very concept of the “human” has come into question recently. Many of the texts that you may have read, including those written during the Enlightenment when human beings were first conceived as having “rights” by virtue of being human, express a wide variety of views about how the “human” is constituted as meaningful. Please refer to your readings (you may be more comfortable using literary or philosophical texts or a combination) to discuss the adventures of the concept. What does it mean to be human and what ethical and political views tend to be associated with different constructions of the term? You might think in terms of contrasts with ancient views about which you have learned or ways in which various critics and writers constitute the idea of the human person, including Freud and Foucault.
2. Grendel’s appearance in *Beowulf* coincides with the erection of Heorot. “Haunting the marches” and “desolate fens” on the edge of the human social world, he once lived with “the banished monsters” of “Cain’s clan, whom the Creator had outlawed / and condemned as outcasts.” It is the very celebrations of Heorot themselves, the banquets and the poetry, which enrages him. Discuss the category of the monstrous. Does it, as these details from the *Beowulf* poet suggest, serve largely as a foil to the human, a kind of abjected or stigmatized

other? Or should we read it in less binary terms, as locating the human in relation to a profusion of other forms of animal existence?

3. Modern medievalists have long warned against imposing modern notions of sexuality on the Middle Ages. The noted feminist historian Caroline Walker Bynum has gone so far to claim that “medieval people [did not] understand as erotic or sexual a number of bodily sensations which we interpret that way.” How would you describe medieval notions of the erotic? Would you say that an interest in sexuality was an important feature of medieval culture, or would you agree with Bynum and her predecessors that what looks erotic to the modern eye generally results from some other cause?
4. Shapeshifting and other forms of bodily metamorphosis constitute a significant fascination of both medieval and ancient culture, with the proviso that the Middle Ages drew many of its most widely disseminated stories of metamorphosis from classical antiquity, especially from the work of Ovid. Discuss the problem of shapeshifting and metamorphosis and their significances in medieval and ancient culture. Were those significances largely the same? What were the differences?
5. How might you discuss the social and cultural effects of political marginality? How might the experience of marginality be translated into a particular vision of identity—what are some of the paradigms that have been developed to address this question? What are some of the problems associated with them in the literature you may have read (if you believe there are any)?

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## II. Examination Day Two: History, Epoch, Crisis

1.

How do you interpret the meaning of “historical crisis” or a “predicament of culture” and how is it reflected in various forms of literature and philosophy and in how questions of “identity” and selfhood are posed? How do novels and critics who grapple with torture and violence define those moments as a historical crisis? Again, the emphasis is on the concept of historical crisis: you may use any texts you have read to address the question, though some will be more relevant than others.

2.

What does the present owe to the past? In *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Benjamin objects to the ideal of traditional historiography, that is, to understand “the way it really was,” and particularly to the empathy with previous epochs that such a goal entails. “It is a process of empathy whose origin is the indolence of the heart, *acedia*, which despairs of grasping and holding the genuine historical image as it flares up briefly. Among medieval theologians it was regarded as the root cause of sadness. Flaubert, who was familiar with it, wrote: ‘*Peu de gens devineront combine il a fallu être triste pour ressuciter Carthage* [Few will be able to guess how sad one had to be in order to resuscitate Carthage].’ The nature of this sadness stands out more clearly if one asks with whom the adherents of historicism actually empathize. The answer is inevitable: with the victor.”

Picking one of the traditions or historical periods you have studied, assess Benjamin's claim. Does "holding the genuine historical image as it flares up" always require reading against the grain, as Benjamin argues? Or is empathy sometimes necessary after all?

3.

Many critics are very uncomfortable with the dangers posed by writing about the Holocaust and other human catastrophes in other than documentary terms. How valid do you feel this position is? Does testimony of whatever sort (historical, literary, legal) about an event or experience (catastrophe, colonization, genocide, fratricide) pose ethical problems if it is not in documentary form and how or why? In short, does the documentary form allow us to capture extreme events in history more truthfully than other kinds of language? You may use any primary sources you have read that seem relevant, including literature that implicitly militates against this view.

4.

In the Confessions, as Augustine recounts the history of his own conversion to Christianity, one of the central signs of the pagan culture he would eventually renounce was his fierce devotion to the theater. Augustine's rejection would prove prophetic. With some notable exceptions (such as the mystery cycles of later medieval England), ancient and medieval Christianity, which appropriated so much of classical culture, remained hostile to drama, and initiated nearly a millennium of literary culture that largely did without drama. Using Augustine's discussion in Book II, chapters 1 and 2 of the Confessions as your point of departure, and the drama of fifth-century Athens as your proof-texts, compare Christian and classical attitudes to drama, theatricality and performance. Is it simply the clash between the excessive piety of Christianity and the worldliness of ancient drama, as is often claimed? Or do we have a contrast between two different forms of piety, and—for that matter—two different forms of worldiness?



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### **III. Examination Day Three: Faith, Modernity, Intention**

1. Much ink has been spilled about the consequences of the “decline” of faith, especially by the late nineteenth century. This decline has largely been attributed to the forces of “modernity” and “modernization,” and is supposed to be embodied by a literary genre, modernism, some of whose greatest names were religious (T.S. Eliot). Why are Kafka, Woolf, or Freud (or any others you wish to discuss) conceived of as secular writers? What is it about their work that leads critics to define them as such, or are there religious undertones in modernism?
2. Anyone possessing even a passing familiarity with the history of modern thought will be aware of Nietzsche’s pronouncement that “God is dead.” Less well known is the initial context for that statement. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche says, “After Buddha was dead, his shadow was still shown for centuries in a cave—a tremendous, gruesome shadow. God is dead, but given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown. —And we—we still have to vanquish his shadow, too.” Discuss the “shadow” of religious belief and religious tradition in modernity—that is, the features that still persist—especially among those, like Nietzsche, who have renounced or abandoned them.

3. How does religion shape notions of social justice for good and ill? Please address this question using the long view (referencing thinkers from different periods) or more specifically, by referencing writers such as Kafka or Freud. You may think of “social justice” as it is manifest in a variety of ways (e.g. aesthetically and ethically as a vision of the good).
4. Freud’s *Future of an Illusion* is a classic statement of modern atheism. Freud certainly insists that “religious doctrines” are illusory: “all of them are illusions and unsusceptible of proof. No one can be compelled to think them true, to believe in them. Some of them are so improbable, so incompatible with everything we have laboriously discovered about the reality of the world, that we may compare them—if we pay proper regard to the psychological differences—to delusions.” But he also feels obliged to explain them: “religious ideas have arisen from the same need as have all the other achievements of civilization: from the necessity of defending oneself against the crushingly superior force of nature. To this a second motive was added—the urge to rectify the shortcomings of civilization that made themselves painfully felt. Moreover, it is especially apposite to say that civilization gives the individual these ideas, for he finds them there already; they are presented to him ready-made . . . . What he is entering is the heritage of many generations, and he takes it over as he does the multiplication table, geometry and similar things.” Based on your knowledge of ancient and medieval religion, is Freud’s assessment accurate? Why or why not? Is there anything he has left out? If so, what implications does that have for his argument?
5. Asked whether Godot represented God, Samuel Beckett is reputed to have replied, “If I’d a-meant God, I’d a-bloody well said God.” Drawing on specific examples, discuss the problem of intention. Is it a necessary category? Is it, as some claim, not only necessary, but absolutely unavoidable? Is it possible to recover an intention in a written work apart from the actual text of the work? Should intention constrain interpretation? Should, for example, readings of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* always return to Dante’s Christianity, or readings of Céline’s *Journey to the End of Night* always return to Céline’s fascism? Or should interpretation primarily serve the needs of the reader?