

Department of English Literatures and Cultures
Final exam topics

In preparation for the exam, the student is asked to study each of the following literary works/excerpts, paying especial attention to their genre and the socio-cultural environment in which they were written. The student will be expected to use the text s/he picks at the exam as a starting point for intellectual discussion embracing its place in literary history and the wider historical, social and cultural implications that it conveys and relates to.

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1.

“When April with his sweet showers has
pierced the drought of March to the root,
and bathed every vein in such moisture
as has power to bring forth the flower;
when also, Zephyrus with his sweet breath
has breathed spirit into the tender new shoots
in every wood and meadow, and the young sun,
has run half his course in the sign of the Ram,
and small birds sing melodies and
sleep with their eyes open all the night
(so Nature pricks them in their hearts):
then people long to go on pilgrimages,
and palmers long to seek strange shores
and far-off shrines known in various lands,
and, especially, from the ends of every shire
in England they come to Canterbury,
to seek the holy, blissful martyr
who helped them when they were sick.
It befel that one day in that season,
as I was in Southwark at the Tabard Inn,
ready to go on my pilgrimage
to Canterbury with a most devout heart,
at night there came into that hostelry
a company of nine-and-twenty people-
all sorts of people, who had met by chance;
and all of them were pilgrims
who were riding toward Canterbury.”

(Geoffrey Chaucer: *The Canterbury Tales*. From the General Prologue)

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2.

Chorus

“O for a Muse of fire, that would ascend
The brightest heaven of invention,
A kingdom for a stage, princes to act
And monarchs to behold the swelling scene!
Then should the warlike Harry, like himself,
Assume the port of Mars, and at his heels,
Leashed in like hounds, should famine, sword and fire
Crouch for employment. But pardon, gentles all,
The flat unraised spirits that hath dared
On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth
So great an object. Can this cockpit hold
The vasty fields of France? Or may we cram
Within this wooden O the very casques
That did affright the air at Agincourt?
O, pardon, since a crooked figure may
Attest in little place a million,
And let us, ciphers to this great account,
On your imaginary forces work.
Suppose within the girdle of these walls
Are now confined two mighty monarchies,
Whose high upreared and abutting fronts
The perilous narrow ocean parts asunder.”

(From William Shakespeare: *Henry V*, Act I, Prologue)

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3.

“Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey,
Where wealth accumulates, and men decay:
Princes and lords may flourish, or may fade;
A breath can make them, as a breath has made;
But a bold peasantry, their country’s pride,
When once destroy’d, can never be supplied.

A time there was, ere England’s griefs began,
When every rood of ground maintain’d its man;
For him light labour spread her wholesome store,
Just gave what life requir’d, but gave no more:
His best companions, innocence and health;”
And his best riches, ignorance of wealth.”

(From Oliver Goldsmith, “The Deserted Village”)

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4.

“HIS ACADEMY is not an entire single Building, but a Continuation of several Houses on both Sides of a Street; which growing waste, was purchased and applyed to that Use. (...) I went into another Chamber, but was ready to hasten back, being almost overcome with a horrible Stink. My Conductor pressed me forward, conjuring me in a Whisper to give no Offence, which would be highly resented; and therefore I durst not so much as stop my Nose. The Projector of this Cell was the most ancient Student of the Academy. His Face and Beard were of a pale Yellow; his Hands and Clothes daubed over with Filth. When I was presented to him, he gave me a close Embrace (a Compliment I could well have excused.) His Employment from his first coming into the Academy, was an Operation to reduce human Excrement to its original Food, by separating the several Parts, removing the Tincture which it receives from the Gall, making the Odour exhale, and scumming off the Saliva. He had a weekly Allowance from the Society, of a Vessel filled with human Ordure about the Bigness of a Bristol Barrel.”

(From Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*. Book III. Ch. 5)

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5.

“The regiment with its officers was to be transported in ships provided by His Majesty’s Government for the occasion; and in two days after the festive assembly at Mrs. O’Dowd’s apartments, in the midst of cheering from all the East India ships, in the river and the military on shore, the band, playing “God save the King,” the officers wawing their hats, and the crews hurrahing gallantly, the transports went down the river an proceeded under convoy to Ostend. Meanwhile the gallant Jos had agree to escort his sister and the Major’s wife, the bulk of whose goods and chattels, including the famous bird of paradise and turban, were with the regimental baggage; so that our two heroines drove pretty much unencumbered to Ramstgate, where there plenty of packets plying of packets plying, in one of which they had a speedy passage to Ostend.

That period of Jos’s life which now ensued was so full of incident that it served him for conversation for many years after, and even the tiger-hunt story was put aside for more stirring narratives which he had to tell about the great campaign of Waterloo.

(From William Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*. Ch. XXVIII)

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6.

“This man had kept a school
And rode our winged horse;
This other his helper and friend
Was coming into his force;
He might have won fame in the end,
So sensitive his nature seemed,
So daring and sweet his thought.
This other man I had dreamed
A drunken, vainglorious lout.
He had done most bitter wrong
To some who are near my heart,
Yet I number him in the song;
He, too, has resigned his part
In the casual comedy;
He, too, has been changed in his turn,
Transformed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.”

(From W. B. Yeats, *Easter 1916*)

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7.

“My poor scapegoat,

I almost love you
but would have cast, I know,
the stones of silence.
I am the artful voyeur

of your brain’s exposed
and darkened combs,
your muscles’ webbing
and all your numbered bones:

I who have stood dumb
when your betraying sister,
cauled in tar,
wept by the railings,

who would connive
in civilized outrage
yet understand the exact
and tribal, intimate revenge.”

(From Seamus Heaney, “Punishment”)

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8.

“He entered the house, which to tell the truth, Dame Van Winkle had always kept in neat order. It was empty, forlorn, and apparently abandoned. This desolateness overcame all his connubial fears – he called loudly for his wife and the children -- the lonely chambers rang for a moment with his voice, and then all again was silence.

He now hurried forth, and hastened to his old resort, the little village inn, but it too was gone. A large ricketty wooden building stood in its place, with great gaping windows, some of them broken, and mended with old hats and petticoats and over the door was painted; “The Union Hotel, by Jonathan Doolittle.” Instead of the great tree that used to shelter the quiet little Dutch inn of yore, there now was reared a tall naked pole, with something on top that looked like a red night cap, and from it was fluttering a flag, on which was a singular assemblage of stars and stripes -- all this was strange and incomprehensible. He recognised on the sign, however, the ruby face of King George, under which he had smoked so many a peaceful pipe, but even this was singularly metamorphosed. The red coat was changed for one of blue and buff, a sword was stuck in the hand instead of a sceptre, the head was decorated with a cocked hat, and underneath was painted in large characters, GENERAL WASHINGTON.

(From Washington Irving, “Rip Van Winkle”)

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9.

“John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage.

John is practical in the extreme. He has no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and he scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures.

John is a physician, and *perhaps*—(I would not say it to a living soul, of course, but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind--) *perhaps* that is one reason I did not get well faster. You see he does not believe I am sick!

And what can one do?

If a physician of high standing, and one’s own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency—what is one to do?

My brother is also a physician, and also of high standing, and he says the same thing.”

(From Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper”)

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10.

“About half way between West Egg and New York the motor road hastily joins the railroad and runs beside it for a quarter of a mile, so as to shrink away from a certain desolate area of land. This is a valley of ashes – a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of ash-grey men, who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air. Occasionally a line of grey cars crawls along the invisible track, gives out a ghastly creak, and comes to rest, and immediately the ash-grey men swarm up with leaden spades and stir up an impenetrable cloud, which screens their obscure operations from your sight.

But above the grey land and the spasm of bleak dust which drift endlessly over it, you perceive, after a moment, the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg. The eyes of T. J. Eckleburg are blue and gigantic – their retinas are one yard high. They look out of no face, but, instead, from a pair of enormous yellow spectacles which pass over a non-existent nose. Evidently some wild wag of an oculist set them there to fatten his practice in the borough of Queens, and then sank down himself into eternal blindness, or forgot them and moved away. But his eyes, dimmed by many countless days, under sun and rain, brood on over the solemn dumping ground.”

(From F. Scott Fitzgerald: *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Penguin, 1994, 29.)

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11.

I've known rivers:

I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the
flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy
bosom turn all golden in the sunset

I've known rivers:

Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

(Langston Hughes, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers")

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12.

“I ran down eleven flights with a pen in my hand today. And suddenly I stopped, you hear me? And in the middle of that office building, do you hear this? I stopped in the middle of that building and I saw - the sky. I saw the things that I love in this world. The work and the food and time to sit and smoke. And I looked at the pen and said to myself, what the hell am I grabbing this for? Why am I trying to become what I don't want to be? What am I doing in an office, making a contemptuous, begging fool of myself, when all I want is out there, waiting for me the minute I say I know who I am!

[...] I am not a leader of men, Willy, and neither are you. You were never anything but a hard-working drummer who landed in the ash can like all the rest of them! I'm one dollar an hour, Willy! I tried seven states and couldn't raise it. A buck an hour! Do you gather my meaning? I'm not bringing home any prizes any more, and you're going to stop waiting for me to bring them home!”

(From Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*)

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13.

“A few minutes later, back on the road, we saw a remarkable and startling sight. It appeared in the sky ahead of us and to the left, prompting us to lower ourselves in the seats, bend our heads for a clear view, exclaim to each other in half finished phrases. It was the black billowing cloud, the airborne toxic event, lighted by the clear beams of seven helicopters. They were tracking its windborne movement, keeping it in view. In every car, heads shifted, drivers blew their horns to alert others, faces appeared in side windows, expressions set in tones of outlandish wonderment.

The enormous dark mass moved like some death ship in a Norse legend, escorted across the night by armored creatures with spiral wings. We weren't sure how to react. It was a terrible thing to see, so close, so low, packed with chlorides, benzenes, phenols, hydrocarbons, or whatever the precise toxic content. But it was also spectacular, part of the grandness of a sweeping event, like the vivid scene in the switching yard or the people trudging across the snowy overpass with children, food, belongings, a tragic army of the dispossessed. Our fear was accompanied by a sense of awe that bordered on the religious. It is surely possible to be awed by the thing that threatens your life, to see it as a cosmic force, so much larger than yourself, more powerful, created by elemental and willful rhythms. This was a death made in the laboratory, defined and measurable, but we thought of it at the time in a simple and primitive way, as some seasonal perversity of the earth like a flood or tornado, something not subject to control. Our helplessness did not seem compatible with the idea of a man-made event.”

(From Don DeLillo, *White Noise. Text and Criticism*. Ed. Mark Osteen. New York: Penguin, 1998, 127-28.)