

Comprehensive Examination Rationale

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Exam Areas

20th Century American Fiction

History of the Novel

Overview

For my reading year, I focused on the History of the Novel and 20th Century American Fiction. I had several goals: 1) to fill some gaps in my knowledge of the major aesthetic movements of the modern era, particularly in relation to form and cultural/intellectual context. 2) to investigate the literary experiments of realism, romanticism, naturalism, modernism, postmodernism and after, so that I could better understand the literary traditions I draw from in my own creative work, and help my students connect literary practice with aesthetic philosophy. 3) to investigate specific areas of interest in disability studies, modernism, and the comic novel. I formulated these interests in connection with my own creative project: a comic novel featuring a disabled main character using literary techniques that continue the modernist experiments with interiority, irony and epistemological doubt.

However, the further I read into my lists, the more I saw connections and intersections between these modules, and my lists in general. I see many of the works the American fiction and History of the Novel lists to be centered on an ambivalence toward and critique of the modern, liberal, humanist self, a product of the Enlightenment and codified by Kant, which is defined as possessing autonomy, agency, and rationality (see Shildrick and Wolfe). Modernism critiques this construct through experiments with character (see Levenson), non-linear narrative, and fragmentation, just to name a few elements, while postmodernism intensifies this critique through metafictional play, suspicion of metanarratives, and indeterminacy. Disability studies also challenges modern liberal self's essential nature, focusing on embodiment, materiality, and interdependency while the comic novel focuses its critique with its logic of the absurd, return to materiality and the body, and its focus on human limitation. I kept these connections in mind as I formulated my lists. I also paid close attention to periodization, as it is useful for historicizing various aesthetic movements and points out important similarities and differences in fiction of the modern era. I see transitions not so much in terms of historical breaks but in terms of responses and re-engagement, invention and inheritance, with past forms and projects.

History of the Novel

In his preface to *The Art of the Novel*, Kundera says that "Every novelist's work contains an explicit vision of the history of the novel." Elsewhere in *The Curtain*, Kundera foregrounds his concern for novelistic history as contingent on a work's aesthetic value: "it is only within the context of an art's historical evolution that aesthetic value can be seen" (5). As I formulated my list, I kept this aesthetic dialogue in mind: that the history of the novel does not have discrete and autonomous movements. Rather, each aesthetic period is a response and re-engagement with past forms (for example, postmodernism rehabilitates the metafictional play of the early modern novelists). I also kept in mind Peter Brooker's insight that the history of the novel often "appears to take the form of successive generations claiming their work is 'more real' than that of their

predecessors” (218). So I focused on how novelists used the novel to represent different realities throughout the modern era. I started with what is widely considered to be the first modern novel, *Don Quixote*, because of its rhetorical and satirical positioning against the romance and its concentration on character and secular materiality, fitting in with Lukacs’ idea that the novel is “the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God” (88).

Thereafter, I focused my list on competing “realisms” throughout Britain, Europe, and North America, while also broadening out to global, postcolonial works from Rushdie, Marquez, and Achebe. I found it useful to frame my list in competing categorizations of traditional realism, romance, naturalism, modernism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism, all of which claim to represent their own specific reality. For example, we might see the romanticism of Melville’s *Moby Dick* as using realist tropes but also critiquing realism in that it represents the world as symbolic, allegorical, mythic, fragmentary, unseen, and ultimately unknowable, while a postmodern novel like *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* critiques realism through metafictional play, parabasis and surrealism, while also engaging with political history. Throughout my reading, I asked: Using literary movements as categories, how can we trace the development of the novel in the modern era? In each of these categories, what “reality” is being represented? What work do these novels do in the social world? How do the formal qualities in each text reflect and interact with contemporaneous social norms?

Contemporary Comic Novel

As Howard Jacobson writes, the comic novel does not get much respect. Aristotle never delivered on his promised treatise on comedy, and its critical reception has suffered ever since, with detractors characterizing the genre as light, whimsical and unserious. But from my core list, we can see that the history of the novel starts in the comic form with Cervantes, Fielding, Sterne, and Austen. With this tradition in mind, I wanted to explore the contemporary comic novel: the different ways it might be considered comic (whether formal, structural, tonal, or thematic) and the important social work it does. I would argue that the comic mode mainly comes from incongruity, which is especially useful when thinking about the history of the novel. Jonathan Greenberg says that satire (and I’d argue the comic form in general) undermines and disrupts the inheritance of traditional literary forms, and can be viewed as “a force or agent of modernity” (9). The comic mode represents a world especially abandoned by God, in that its characters often face the gap between mind and body, between expectations and material reality. The characters do not have the nobility and transcendence afforded to tragedy. They are, in a sense, already fallen.

In the contemporary period, we see the rise of ‘60s counterculture and postmodernism, a radical questioning of authority and bourgeois norms, the critique of enlightenment beliefs of progress, logic, and metanarratives. This condition is prime for the comic novel, which can have a critical liberating and disillusioning function, piercing false beliefs and pointing out folly. Comedy is often drawn from uncertainty and confusion in general, with the Bahktinian suspension of hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions, which are the result of epistemological, ontological, and identity confusions. But the comic novel does not just have a liberating function, as Frye says, because while comedy can be subversive it also can have an underlying conservative and moralistic impulse, in what he calls the “poles of satire” (qtd. in Greenburg). However, I would argue that morals and norms become less stable as we progress into the postmodern era. So I wondered: what function comic novels play in a social world? How

might categorizations such as comedy of manners, black comedy, existential comedy, and campus comedy be used to make sense of thematic differences?

I was also drawn to works that border on tragicomedy, works undergirded by trauma and an obsession with materiality. I would argue that the contemporary comic novel is characterized by a mixture of forms and tone rather than being a “pure” comedy, if there ever was such a thing. As Chris Bachelder says, a story often gets funnier “in precise correlation to the severity and gravity of its content” (“The Dead Chipmunk”). Accordingly, I was struck with the narrative force of many of these novels, which use irony and the comic mode to defend against trauma, and the climaxes often come when the characters can no longer keep trauma at bay (*Catch-22*, *The Family Fang*, *The Black Brook*). This element has much in common with the themes of fiction from my disability and modernism modules, which also focus on trauma, materiality, and irony. Therefore, I asked: what is the relation between comedy and trauma? How does irony work to defend against tragedy? How do comic novelists foreground the limits of irony?

Modernist Novel

My interest in the modernist novel developed throughout my PhD coursework as I began to see its rich influence on contemporary literature. I read canonical modernists (Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Lawrence, Conrad, Joyce, Woolf) but also other marginal writers (Lewis, Waugh, Hurston, Barnes, Beckett), to arrive at a more diverse response to modernism, both high and late modernism, as well as its legacy for contemporary literature.

I view modernism emerging at a time of crises, as Lewis describes it: crises in representation, in liberalism, and in reason (2). For instance, this crisis of representation was the basis for experiments in form, as writers like Conrad, Proust, Joyce, and Woolf explored interiority to extend the realist vision, getting closer to the “reality” of character in individual subjectivity through impressionism. Language became more self-reflexive and self-conscious, as writers had less faith in transparent and external representation of traditional realism, but attempted to recuperate the chaos and fragmentation of society through form and *le mot juste*.

However, I was also interested in late modernism of Barnes, Waugh, and Beckett, which critique some aspects of High Modernism, with less faith in the transcendence of form and art. I see these modernists being much more comic, concerned with, as Greenberg says, how to authentically feel in the modern world. I contend that this ironic stance and suspicion of language and feeling is as much of a modernist heritage (starting with Flaubert) as are the interior explorations of Proust, Joyce, and Woolf. I also see modernism engaging with trauma, the trauma of history or war that presents itself physically (*Sun Also Rises*, *Sound and the Fury*) or psychically (*As I Lay Dying*, *Nightwood*, *Tarr*), in which the narrative swirls around a central trauma and the writers experiment with affect and form. This has much in common with my disability-studies module and comic module. So in this module, I asked myself: How does the modernist novel respond to different aspects of modernity, like technological advances and war? How do modernist writers respond to and depict trauma? How do modernist writers critique the idea of the modern, liberal, humanist self? How do these writers use the comic mode to authentically feel in the modern world? What is modernism’s legacy for contemporary literature?

Twentieth-Century American Literature

As with History of the Novel list, I am interested in the progression of literary movements, but in a uniquely American context in the 20th century. I am interested in America's shifts from realism, to naturalism, modernism, postmodernism and after. I am particularly interested in modernism and postmodernism, seeing postmodernism as an intensification of many aspects of modernism, from the critique of the liberal humanist self to the mistrust in language and experiment with form. I also see a lively realist tradition continuing into the 21st century.

I am not confident that we can settle on cultural dominant for our contemporary moment (which is a problem for periodization and historicizing in general) but I will claim that postmodernism as practiced today is qualitatively different from the "high postmodernism" of the '60s and '70s as practiced by Barth, Barthelme and Pynchon in more reception to minority voices, more concern with global politics and transnational identities (Adams, Giles), and a re-engagement with realism in what has been formulated as a literature of renewal (Toth, McLaughlin). So with this module, I asked: Using literary movements as categories, how can we trace the development of American literature in the twentieth century?

Disability Studies

I had difficulty forming my list, as disability studies is an emerging discipline inside the academy. As critic Leslie Fiedler said in 1962, disability "remains the last outpost" of American fiction (qtd. In Mitchell and Synder 13). But as I considered my core list, I soon realized that disability is ever-present in American literature, but the manner of its representation can often result in marginalization and erasure. Critic David Mitchell writes that disability is used as a "narrative prosthesis," as critical turning point and analytical fulcrum in plots, particularly as a metaphoric used to represent something else (evil, moral failings, pity), and often falling into narratives of sentimental burden, propaganda, or overcoming (see *Bleak House*). So I wanted to stay away from novels that used disability as a locus of pity for sentimental purposes.

Instead, I focused on direct representations of the disabled. As critic Alice Hall says, at its best, fiction can "facilitate alternative understandings of the lived experiences of disabled people" (14). This lived experience challenges the modern liberal subject, which Shildrick defines as having "autonomy, agency – which includes both a grasp of rationality and control over one's own body – and a clear distinction between self and other" ("Critical Disability Studies" 32). I would argue that this autonomous liberal subject has a sacred place in American culture, with its focus on individuality and self-reliance. In contrast, disabled subjectivity is often interdependent and reveals the materiality and vulnerability of the body, what Tobin Siebers calls "complex embodiment." When represented in literary fiction, disability can often spur narrative innovation and non-normative representation (Hall, Quayson, Berube). As Zunshine says, when we read fiction partly to imagine our "Theory of Mind," trying on "mental states potentially available to us but at a given moment differing from our own" (17), but disability forces us to explore alternative senses of time, space and consciousness.

During my reading year, I found representations of non-normative minds in the fiction of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, Carson McCullers' *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, Jayne Anne Phillips' *Lark and Termite*, Richard Powers' *The Echo Maker*, and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*. These novels attempt to imagine the consciousness of the disabled 'other,' but (with the exception of Wallace as depressive and addict) it is an able-bodied writer imagining with third-person omniscience, purporting to speak and think for the disabled person. This made for

great tension in much of the fiction. As Hall says, fiction can help us “enter into this process of becoming another consciousness, but at the same time, it confronts us with the aesthetic, ethical and imaginative limits of this struggle” (17). All five narratives take place on the margins of America. So with these novels, I asked: How are non-normative minds used as an occasion for narrative experimentation and to what end? Is there anything particularly American about these disability texts?

Several other titles on my list reflect my interest in the comic mode. Instead of using comedy to laugh derisively at the disabled, these texts use jokes and the comic form to interrogate American notions of normality, disability and sentimentality. For example, *The Revised Fundamentals of Caregiving*, *The Magic Kingdom*, *Geek Love* and *Infinite Jest* all destabilize normative and able-bodied categories, subverting dominant cultural norms. They seem to play off the anxiety and confusion of how to feel about disability, using play and irony to keep trauma at bay, but also interacting with materiality and tragedy perhaps more than the other texts. Reading these texts, I asked: How do writers use the comic mode to subvert normative categories and the discourse of sentimentality?