

## Exam Rationale: 20<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> Century British Literature & the Comic Sensibility and 20<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> Century American Literature & the Comic Sensibility

### *Introduction*

For my exams, I chose to study 20<sup>th</sup> Century British Literature and 20<sup>th</sup> Century American Literature. More specifically, I'm interested in how comedy can be used as a lens through which we view literature; accordingly, I chose comic literature as the focus of each of my modules. Beginning my research, I found it surprisingly difficult to find criticism on comedy; many of the critical texts on humor that I found consisted of meditations on the philosophical underpinnings of humor—why a joke is funny—rather than serious studies of the comedic elements of texts. By reading (and writing on) a list of important comic books, I wanted to add my voice to the small but growing contingent claiming that comic novels and short stories are important as serious literature—and that this sort of literature hasn't received its fair due. I think there are multiple reasons for this: First, there may be a sense among readers of serious literature that humor is difficult—or impossible—to study, that one “just knows” what's funny and what isn't. Secondly, I'd argue that fewer works of humor make it into the canon because they don't fit into established notions about what serious literature is and should be. And yet comedy plays an important social role: Critchley argues that “[a joke] makes explicit the enormous commonality that is implicit in our social life and [...] humor reveals the depth of what we share” (18) and multiple scholars of comedy (Stott, Hutcheon) make the point of its political power and relationship with ideology, whether it is used as a corrective force—like satire—or used to uphold oppressive forces, such as the humor of superiority—jokes that are racist, sexist, ageist, et cetera. Beyond those considerations, there are many important comic works that have been studied seriously, but not always with regards to their comic achievements. Furthermore, as a fiction writer, it made sense for me to also interrogate elements of the craft of humor (many of which are intertwined with theoretical principles of humor) and how they are manifested in 20<sup>th</sup> century literature, as well as the unique challenges of writing in the comic mode.

More broadly, I'm interested in the progression of literature from the beginning of the century to the present day, and in how literature is generally characterized in the twentieth century—how literary movements can be useful as categorizations. (I don't think these two areas of interest are necessarily at odds, either: I'd argue that comedy plays a more significant role in postmodernism, when literature became more playful and began to incorporate a mixture of high and low culture, than it does in modernism or realism.) Furthermore, a studied knowledge of literary movements is useful in beginning to examine the progression of comedy over the twentieth century—for example, tracing the use of farce in P.G. Wodehouse's novels to its occurrence, along with other comedic structures and devices, in later novels such as Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim*. So, ultimately, I see these two modes of analysis as complementing one another. I'm also interested in a number of themes that I see as significant in the role of 20<sup>th</sup> century comedy; these themes are described in the sections below.

### *20<sup>th</sup> Century British Literature*

#### *I. British Literary Movements*

In my mind, important questions of twentieth century British literature have to do largely with its departure from previously established modes of realism and Romanticism; in my reading, I traced different ways that this happens. For example, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*,

published serially in 1899 and in book form in 1902, forms a bridge between Romantic ideals and modernist ones. It relies on traditional narrative ideals of heroism—the figures of Marlow and Kurtz as they make their respective journeys into the Congo—and women serve as arbiters of a naïve morality, and yet these ideals are changing, as the book takes on themes of imperialism in a changing world, alienation, confusion, and individual psychology, all functions that came to be the strongholds of modernist literature. Virginia Woolf's novels, such as *To The Lighthouse*, further represent modernism, largely in her use of formal experimentation—for example, the breaking from the eye-of-God omniscience of the realists, suggesting a multiplicitous view of the world. Reality is presented from multiple angles with the use of a shifting point of view; time is no longer presented in equal segments, attempting to more closely mimic human perception of time, in which some events are perceived to pass more quickly than others.

Postmodernism, in my mind, is both a continuation of modernism and a move beyond it, in which formal experimentation is pushed even further; conventions are challenged, and language is playful, and literature goes even further in destabilizing reality. Mixed modes and forms appear on the page: For example, in Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body*, faux-scientific segments on body parts is combined with poetic discourse on a romantic relationship. In particular, I see *counter-narratives and alternate histories as an important part of British postmodernism*, as the literary field became wider and more open to oppositions to grand narratives, and literature continued to reactive to the notion of a wholly knowable world, of one Truth and one Reality. *Written on the Body*, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, and *Flaubert's Parrot* all include forms of counter-narratives.

Books don't always fit into the chronological/historical model of literary movements. For example, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* was published in 1958, long after modernist texts had questioned the validity of realism as a literary mode, and yet I see the book as a realist/naturalist text, in which characters respond to animalistic, visceral urges as well as to their environments and life situations; moreover, life is grittier and more sordid, and free will is questioned—all landmarks of naturalist literature. I also agree with Laura Mooneyham, who argues that P.G. Wodehouse's *Jeeves* novels are anachronisms in the modernist period: they don't represent the world with fragmentation and alienation; they allow for full and complete resolutions, often happy ones; texts are "readerly" rather than writerly; they are easily accessible to reader; action is fixed in time and space; time is never disjointed; point of view is stable; Wodehouse believes in a comprehensible world (123). More than that, whenever I start considering postmodernism in terms of its formal qualities, I remember that it also might be defined in its literary interest in a new, multicultural worldview, including writers such as Zadie Smith; I think this also goes along with the notion of challenging master narratives in shaping the world. There are now more voices to be heard. Is this at odds with notions of postmodernism as marked by a particular set of stylistic innovations and formal qualities?

So, then: how can categories of realism, modernism, and postmodernism be used to usefully interrogate British literature? What constitutes realism, modernism, and postmodernism in 20<sup>th</sup> century British literature? Is there more than one way to interpret these terms—in terms of chronology, formal qualities, and/or themes? What are some of the significant themes of 20<sup>th</sup> century British literature, and how are these themes manifested?

## *II. The Comic Sensibility: British Literature*

Another lens for viewing British literature is through the presence of the comic. As a writer operating (I hope) in the comic mode myself, I saw the need for familiarity with the comic tradition; moreover, I hoped that by closely interrogating the formal qualities and themes of comic texts—the different ways that a novel might be considered “comic,” whether it be a wry or ironic narrator, a foolish, self-unaware character, physical/farcical humor, or language incongruity—that this would help me better understand the mode. Naturally, some of the work I did with the broader principles of comedy in American literature overlaps with my study of British literature; as a means of studying the two in different, useful ways, I chose to focus my rationale on British comedy around themes (see below) and my study of American literature around formal principles of comedy (voice, character, mode, and situation/plot). Of course, I’ve considered each of these things for both lists, and am prepared to discuss comedy from either approach.

In exploring the tradition of British comedy, I began with Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* as a means of establishing the form of a traditional comedy as a narrative that involves relationship misdirection and/or confusion and then resolves with a feast of celebration (Northrop Fry defines the form of traditional comedy as a pattern of “peril and release,” a “basic structural pattern which moves from unhappiness to happiness” (qtd. in Mooneyham 115)) after that, I read Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* to begin exploring comedy’s relationship with the English code of manners, a relationship that has continued into contemporary comic British literature. Part of my interest in British comedy has to do with exploring it as a mode—what, specifically, comedy accomplishes in a sample of 20<sup>th</sup> century texts—but, as stated above, I am also interested in identifying and exploring themes of books written in the comedic mode; since comedy is culturally bound, I think it’s important to study the specific themes that go along with a nation’s brand of humor. Many British comic books take up the notion of manners as established in *Pride and Prejudice*, though these later novels aren’t themselves novels of manners: *Cold Comfort Farm* and *A Handful of Dust* both generate comedy from the notion of subverting a code of manners. The other themes I identified as important—certainly not a comprehensive list, but one representative of the works on my list—included academic satire (*Lucky Jim*, *The Debut*, *The Matisse Stories*, *Small World*) relational/domestic humor (*How to Be Good*, *High Fidelity*) and absurd humor (*Murphy*, *The BFG*, *Lady Into Fox*), as well as a brand of postmodern humor that was highly related to the tenets of postmodernism itself, including irony and playfulness with form (*Flaubert’s Parrot*, *England, England*, *Remainder*).

## 20<sup>th</sup> Century American Literature

### I. American Literary Movements

As in my study of British literature, I’m interested in the progression of American novels and short stories throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century—how particular themes and formal modes are used in realist, naturalist, modernist, and postmodernist texts (I am most interested in modernism and postmodernism, as they represent the major modes of the twentieth century). How have the formal qualities and themes of literature changed since the period of realism that preceded a major literary shift—the beginning of modernism—in the twentieth century? I see American modernism, like British modernism, as representative of the beginnings of an important change in that it represents a major shift not only in formal experimentation, but also in a changing worldview on the relationship of language and reality. Because of disillusionment that came with the sprawling chaos of the war, modernists saw the world in a different light: their work reflected the pessimism, fragmentation, and chaos that they saw in the world; moreover, they also believed

unlike the realists, that every representation is—in some way—false, since it's a representation. Language no longer was believed to accurately reflect the world, as Saussure believed (there is space between the signifier and signified; language is socially constructed, not “natural”). Accordingly, modernism attempted to achieve a more “real” representation of life than realism before it did—in part by admitting and drawing attention to language's inadequacies and the fact that humans can never wholly know the world, by focusing on individual, rather than historical, understanding. This is apparent in the multiple narrative points of view of Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*.

As I'm largely interested in postmodernism (because of its stronger relationship to comedy) and modernism (since it sets up the literary worldview postmodernism is based on), I'm interested in the following questions: What characterizes postmodernism? What are the formal qualities of postmodern texts, and how do those formal qualities reflect the literary philosophy that undergirds postmodernism? What are the different ways that postmodernism can be conceptualized, and how can this group of texts be used to demonstrate these conceptualizations? More broadly: Using literary movements as categories, how can we trace the development of American literature in the twentieth century?

## *II. The Comic Sensibility: American Literature*

I want to make the case that we should pay more attention to humor—that we can learn things from it, and make statements about American literature by using it as a lens—with special consideration given to the following question: What are some of the specific ways in which humor functions in 20<sup>th</sup> century American literature? Again, as someone who practices the craft of fiction, I thought it was useful to use principles of comedy to interrogate how it is crafted. I studied the literature of comedy theory as a way of using it to undergird discussions of the craft and execution of humor writing.

I'm particularly interested in the following elements: *character, voice, plot/situation, and comic mode* (satire, parody, etc.). Using these categories as a starting point, I undertook a study of how each of these elements functions as comic: For example, what are some of the different forms of character used to achieve comedy (trickster, fool) (Stott) among other, more specific types (*scholastikos*, or absent-minded professor) (Holt)? Using these categories as a framework is useful for organizing statements about twentieth century American humor in its different forms. For example, in *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud argues that one form of humor is discovering pleasure in the familiar, a principle I find to be very applicable to literature and which can be applied to books such as Nicholson Baker's *The Anthologist*. I consider this sort of humor to fall within the ranks of humor of situation; that is, when a narrative achieves comic effect through its situation and/or plot (or lack thereof). In his essay on humor, “The Dead Chipmunk,” Chris Bachelder provides a model for interrogating voice that jibes with laughter's theory of incongruity, which argues that “Wit [...] resides in the inventive drawing together of apparently distant ideas for the amusement and intellectual thrill of the listener” (Stott 137); It's a kind of reading that I haven't often seen performed, one which uses the principles of comedy to interrogate language and voice, which combines theory and craft and really starts to get at the nuances of humor in ways that are not often discussed critically. Accordingly, I hope to show that the categories of character, voice, plot/situation and mode are not final destinations or categories in themselves, but rather organizing principles for the deep study of comedy.

So, then: What are some ways that comedy functions in 20<sup>th</sup> century American literature? How does analyzing literature by using categories of character, voice, plot/situation, and comic

mode help us reach a deeper understanding of 20<sup>th</sup> century American literature? How can each of these categories be explored using contemporary American short stories and novels, illuminating the unique challenges and elements of writing in the comic mode?