

Exam Rationale: The History of the Novel

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My primary reason for choosing to take on *The History of the Novel* as an exam area is simple, yet broad: I've spent the last several years, particularly the years before and during my MFA focusing on contemporary novelists and story writers. While much that I've learned from these contemporary writers has been useful, I was concerned about the huge gaps in my understanding of the novel, and how these gaps could, in the future, come to haunt my own fiction writing. Francine Prose's book on craft, *Reading Like a Writer*, came to me right before I was finalizing my exam areas and lists. In Prose's book, she only strengthened my suspicion that there was much I was missing in my education, and that by simply reading these books, I could pick up on a wealth of not only ideas and ideals, but techniques, that aren't taught as often in today's workshop environment, or even a literature course, as these courses tend toward theory in lieu of simply basking in the quality of novels, and reading them closely.

It is difficult to refine an area as broad as *The History of the Novel* to a specific set of ideas in which I'm most interested. The ranges in time, nationality, style, and purpose of the novels have taught me much, but also frequently evaded my various "lassos" of themes, etc. with which to classify and tame them. But, because it must be done, here is a brief list of what I've grown most interested in over the course of my reading: 1) The purpose of the novel and how it has adapted over time; 2) The depiction of love, and how love can become, for certain characters, their tragic characteristic, their Achilles' heel; and 3) how "the classics" (read, primarily, the Greeks and Romans) have informed the novel over time (through epic and mythic tropes, archetypes, etc).

Both Gardner and Kundera discuss the novel's purpose, and, consequently, its form, as something that changes with each generation and location. Their arguments are similar in this respect: they both see art as a way to fight evil and injustice—whether the evil and injustice take the form of political domination, a dominant ideology, etc. The form the novel takes will depend on the form the evil takes. Gardner sees the novel as a way to instruct the reader in humanness. Watt, too, sees the novel as a way to instruct, particularly the "original" English novels, which he claims are *Robinson Crusoe*, *Pamela*, and *Tom Jones*. I'm interested in how these ideas apply, or don't, to the novels on my list, especially in the novels that seem to toe the lines the critics create, such as Voltaire's *Candide* and Kafka's *The Trial*.

The idea that love is a kind of divine madness dominates not only our contemporary discourse on love, but seems to dominate most of the "love novels" on my list, and to be imbedded in many of the mythologies that define Western thought. This concept has manifested itself in atrocities committed against children, against wives and husbands, and various other relative innocents. This idea is also part of a larger discussion of women's roles in both creating and as characters within fiction.

On my both my primary and secondary lists I've included a number of ancient texts. This is because I'm interested in the sources drawn upon to create the novel. While Richardson and Defoe, both "Moderns," deliberately eschewed classical forms, Fielding and others encouraged a return to the Ancients. Re-reading Aristotle and Plato has only made me realize how often writers, even relatively contemporary writers, such as Carson McCullers, utilize concepts found in these texts. I recognize how a knowledge of these

archetypal characters and plots can greatly inform my future writing, help me to better understand novels I have yet to experience, and guide classroom discussions in my teaching career.