

SAMPLE COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION RESPONSE (PASS)

RESTORATION AND 18TH-CENTURY BRITISH LITERATURE

Question: “No sir,” says Samuel Johnson in the *Life*, “to act from pure benevolence is not possible for finite beings. Human benevolence is mingled with vanity, interest in some motive.” Johnson’s statement is only one volley in a debate about human nature that preoccupied writers of the Restoration and 18th century: Are humans endowed with a native goodness and generosity, or are they driven by self-interest and fear? Using at least four writers working in at least two genres, discuss the attitudes toward human nature: Begin by carefully defining your terms and laying out poles in the attitudes toward human nature; then discuss how the writers either explicitly characterize human nature or dramatize it through imaginative literature.

A discussion of four writers—Gay, Swift, Rochester, and Richardson—will suffice to examine the differing attitudes about human nature as reflected in Restoration and 18th-century literature. John Gay and Swift portrayed man as acting out of self-interest; the wicked and decadent Earl of Rochester considered that man was only another animal acting out of fear; and Richardson proposed that the natural goodness of one person can change the bad behavior of another.

John Gay’s mock-opera, *The Beggar’s Opera*, shows that men and women will act to serve their own ends even at the expense of family and friends. His loveable, but egotistical protagonist, Macheath, manipulates his fiancées, Polly Peachum and Lucy Lockit; he manipulates his various other lovers; and he manipulates Mr. and Mrs. Peachum, the people on whom he depends to make a living. Apparently, all Macheath has to gain is a continuation of his free and easy ways, drinking and carousing with his friends and turning from one woman to another, but the Peachums and Lockits are a different matter. Peachum, a fence for Macheath and other shady characters, knows that Macheath is one of his best suppliers, but he refuses to let Polly marry him because being married would curtail her ability to help him swindle other suppliers of stolen goods. It is in Peachum’s best interest to keep Polly single and at home, so he informs on Macheath to the local jailer, Mr. Lockit. Lockit, of the same ilk as Peachum, serves his own best interest by locking Macheath up, since it is his duty to do so, but more importantly, because Macheath can be touched for money while he is in jail. Peachum and Lockit use each other to further their own ends. Peachum lures people to steal goods for him to resell, eventually selling the thieves themselves by informing on them to Lockit, who then charges the prisoners whatever he can get for favors done for them while they are in jail. While he is thus employed, his superiors reward him for all such villains that he can inform on. Gay presents all this in a comical manner, and the audience wants Macheath to live to rob another day, but the undercurrent is that Gay is exposing an underworld that is dirty and malicious—friend turning on friend for profit.

Swift also acknowledges that man acts out of self-interest in his satirical modest proposal that Irish babies be raised like livestock to be butchered at one year old. His mathematical persona’s proposal is flawlessly logical and would be profitable if it were carried out. He points out that it is in the best interest of the English and Irish landlords who live in comfort in England: Instead of their tenants dying of starvation and not paying their rents, they would have a commodity to sell so that both they and the landlord would profit. Swift, with the sure logic of a rhetorician, has his persona lay out the plan so that it appeals to the pocketbooks of all concerned, plus it has the added bonus of getting rid of some 20,000 or so Papist babies every year, thereby reducing the number of troublesome Catholics in Ireland. The proposal would benefit Irish parents by making the mother as

valuable as other productive livestock so that, instead of beating her, her husband would take tender care of her; it would benefit the country as a whole by providing a new dish for tavern-keepers to sell; and it would free up pigs so that they could be improved through extensive breeding to produce better bacon. Swift wrote his satirical proposal out of frustration that the English Parliament refused to alleviate conditions for the poor in Ireland, and it did not produce immediate results, but through it, Swift emphasizes that if man can be shown how he will profit, he will go along with almost anything.

The worldly Earl of Rochester would probably have agreed with Gay's and Swift's ideas of man's motivations because he saw man as little better than animals. In a poetic mock debate, Rochester's speaker argues with his opponent that man is the only creature who will deliberately turn on his own kind. He acknowledges that animals attack other animals, but only for food, while man turns against his fellow man for any profit that can accrue from his betrayal. He also proposes to his reverend opponent in the argument that government is necessary to control mankind because man is manipulated first by self-interest and then by fear. If a man fears for his own safety or for the safety of his home or investments, he will follow his government's law. Otherwise, he would follow his own law, which amounts to survival of the fittest or to survival of him who can protect his own interests against the incursions of other men who might attempt to despoil him.

In direct contrast to Rochester's morbid picture of mankind is Richardson's *Pamela*. In *Pamela*, Richardson presents a different side of mankind. His protagonist, the innocent and innately good Pamela, retains that innocence and purity in the face of complex plans to seduce her into an illicit relationship with her employer. Time and again she is tried; she is kidnapped, threatened, mistreated, and left to go hungry, but her will never falters. Even when she is left to the devices of her master's housekeeper, who alternately coaxes and threatens her, she does not give in. An effort to physically subdue her fails because she faints at the horror of the act, thereby frightening and chastising her master. Neither promises of money and position or threats to her person or to her aged parents can overcome her innate purity and goodness. In the end (one can imagine out of sheer frustration), her employer marries her to gain what he wants and becomes a better person because of her angelic influence.

Gay, Swift, and Rochester paint bleak pictures of the nature of mankind; Richardson presents a prettier picture as long as the eye is on Pamela, but shift the eye to the antagonist and Richardson's view of mankind falls more in line with the other three. Although Swift does not reveal any personal villainy—only the detached villainy of an unresponsive and uncaring government and of a rationalistic world that would reduce people to numbers—the other three writers do. Pamela and her parents are the only “good” people in Richardson's novel; her master and seducer, his housekeeper, all the people involved in her kidnapping and subsequent imprisonment, even the neighbors, are all complicit in the attempt to seduce her. Gay provides no character who is naturally good—all are out for themselves. Nor does Rochester, who sees mankind as even lower than animals because they betray each other for profit.

GRADE REPORT SHEET
ENGLISH MA COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION

OCTOBER 18, 2008

This is the MA comprehensive examination grade report sheet for the candidate designated by code number below. Please circle the appropriate grade for this area and return the sheet to the graduate director, along with the attached reading list and exam response itself. Provide comments, as appropriate. Thank you.

CODE NUMBER: 21

AREA: Restoration and 18th-Century British Literature

HIGH PASS

PASS

FAIL

COMMENTS (please provide especially in the case of a failing essay):

I wish the writer had spent a little less time discussing plot and more time interrogating the theme of human nature and how it is manifested in each work, the similarities and differences in dialogue between the works. The works of Swift and Rochester are unidentified. The reading of Pamela's character is not an in-depth look at the characterization. A comparison of *Shamela* (which is not on the reading list, however) and *Pamela* might have been more fruitful.

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HIGH PASS

PASS

FAIL

COMMENTS (please provide especially in the case of a failing essay):

Needs more detailed information according to the parameters of the prompt.

Slips into narration of plot at times.

Weakest ¶—*Beggar's Opera*

Strongest ¶s—Swift and Rochester