

SAMPLE COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION RESPONSE (FAIL)

19TH-CENTURY AMERICAN LITERATURE

Question: Discuss “nature” in the works of at least three American authors spanning the 19th century. In your answer you may consider, among other things, the representation of nature, the uses of nature, and the relationship of man/woman to nature. Discuss how the concept and representation of nature change over the course of the century. Refer to at least one longer work or a handful of shorter works by each author.

The American Renaissance was born out of a need for a literature that expressed the unique American experience. In these expressions, many writers incorporated nature, either by setting, symbolism, or in its relationship to humans. Some writers saw nature as a place to be close to God. Through the nineteenth century, American writers used nature as a place to escape. Nature and objects that represent nature were used symbolically to portray meaning. Beginning with the early works of the American Renaissance and moving through the literary movements of Romanticism, Realism, and Naturalism in the nineteenth century, the changing role of nature can be explored.

Washington Irving has been considered to be the first imaginative American writer of the American Renaissance. In his story “Rip Van Winkle,” Irving’s art serves to depict the national dilemma. In *Crisis in the Customhouse: Authorship in the American Renaissance*, Jerome Loving says that Rip is “crucial and timeless” in depicting the nineteenth-century situation. Because the world was changing so rapidly, Americans felt, like Rip, as if they had woken up to a new world. The war and industrial revolution caused rapid changes, and people were having a difficult time adapting to the rapid changes. Like many Americans, Rip wanted to escape. Irving’s character has a rebirth after going into the woods with his gun and his dog. When he immerses from nature, the world has changed because he has been asleep for such a long time. He feels as though he does not know himself. Nature provides Rip’s escape from society and ultimate rebirth.

Nature has a similar role in Romanticism. Like Rip Van Winkle’s escape, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s character Young Goodman Brown also goes into the woods. Although Rip is America’s first hen-pecked husband and goes into the woods to escape from his wife, Young Goodman Brown leaves his wife, Faith, whom he loves, ironically to think about faith. He meets a series of characters that make him question his religious faith. When he comes away from nature, out of the woods, he is changed. The world is not new in the same sense as Rip Van Winkle’s world, but he sees things differently. Hawthorne uses nature as a symbol for what is wild and unknown. Romanticism was a revolt against the traditional form and content of writing. Like many other writers of this era, he used symbolism and allegory. The pink ribbons in his wife’s bonnet represent her innocence. The staff that turns into a snake represents evil. The reader is unsure if Young Goodman Brown dreamed about the unusual people and events that he saw while he was in the woods or not; however, emerging from nature caused a profound change in his character.

Another writer of the American romance who evoked nature through symbolism was Herman Melville. The narrator of his work, *Moby Dick*, who says to the reader in the opening line, “Call me Ishmael,” relates a story of a giant white whale that symbolizes evil or the façade of evil. Like Hawthorne, Melville uses symbolism to reveal his meaning. Captain Ahab is obsessed with capturing the white whale and puts his crew’s life in jeopardy. The setting for most of the story is out at sea, surrounded by nature and at nature’s mercy. The whale is not only symbolic for evil but also for the strength of nature. After the whale has succeeded in defeating Ahab, sinking the

Pequoid and all its crew, only the narrator is left. Queequeg's coffin is symbolic for rebirth as it pops up from the sinking ship giving the narrator something to use to stay afloat and live to tell the story.

The way stories are written changed after the Civil War when Realism began to replace Romanticism. Realist writers used nature in a slightly different way. They told stories that were mimetic or mimicked real life. Characters still escaped into nature, and they were frequently changed when they emerged, but in the case of Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, nature was used to structure the work. T.S. Eliot said that the river in Twain's masterpiece was what gave the work its form. As Huck and Jim escape society, they use the river to make their getaway. The book has aspects of the slave narrative in that it is a story that includes a slave, Jim, escaping slavery by going north via the river. It was Huck and Jim's intention to head north to Ohio, however the river led them astray. Along their ride they met many other characters and both Huck and Jim experienced growth. At the end of the book, Huck decides not to return to civilization because he has learned the hypocrisy of society and prefers the wild life of nature.

The hypocrisy of society is further exposed by writers of Naturalism. Some writers of the late nineteenth century found Realism a little too soft. Naturalism was developed as an extension of Realism and as a result of the evolving theories and work of Charles Darwin, Emanuel Kant, and Emile Zola. In Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier becomes aware of her place in society. Chopin uses symbolism to make her meanings clear. At the beginning of the story there is a caged bird that constantly repeats "go away, for God's sake." Like the bird, Edna discovers the bars of her cage in society and later in the story; she too, wishes that society would just go away. When her husband tires of the conversation he simply leaves. He is able to do this because he is a man; however, Edna does not have the privilege of living by her whims because a woman does not have that choice in the society in which she lives. She does not like the role that society has dealt her, and her revolt leads to her eventual demise. Edna is seen by the other characters as being "unnatural" because she is different. Her first sensation of awakening is when she is swimming. She feels the freedom and wants more. Chopin uses many "winged symbols" in her story symbolizing the freedom of the bird in nature and the confinement of the caged birds. Ultimately, Edna takes her own life by entering the sea. She goes back to nature into the sea and never returns.

Nature is seen as an escape, used to structure the work, and to end the lives of characters in nineteenth-century literature. The concept of nature in the early part of the century involved a setting or place in which characters could escape. They escaped for various reasons. Rip Van Winkle wanted to get away from his wife and his worries. Young Goodman Brown wanted to go into the woods to think. Ishmael took an adventure out to sea. Towards the end of the century nature was a force. It was victorious over Ahab. It guided the structure of Twain's novel in the form of a river. It showed Edna Pontellier freedom and then provided a place for her suicide. Nature has been represented as a calming place in which to escape and to think. It has also been seen as a powerful force that dominates and kills.

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: 3

AREA: 19th -Century American Literature

HIGH PASS

PASS

FAIL

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

This is a poor attempt at a fairly obvious, easy-to-handle question. The essay does not really address the “nature” question well. The texts chosen are not best representative for the nature issue, although they could have been used. However, the essay attempts little more than to say, “There was nature in this work,” without making an argument *about* its use(s).

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HIGH PASS

PASS

FAIL

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

The essay needs a thesis. As it is, the analysis of nature is simplistic and incoherent. I would like to see the author make an argument about the nuances of what nature entails in greater depth.