

SAMPLE COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION RESPONSE (HIGH PASS)

20TH -/21ST -CENTURY AMERICAN LITERATURE

Question: Define briefly the major characteristics that have traditionally defined *Postmodernism* in American literature. Then, restricting your discussion to a single genre, compare either three Postmodernist novels, three Postmodernist short stories, or three Postmodernist poems (the three in each case coming from three different authors) in terms of how they fulfill and/or diverge from the definition of *Postmodernism* that you have provided.

The definition of postmodernism in relation to literature continues to be contested within academic and literary communities. The point of its inception and break from modernism is unclear, although many suggest that its beginnings took root following the end of World War II. To plot its progression historically, then, is to trace how its definition shifted and changed over the course of the latter half of the 20th century. Literature is perhaps one of the most concrete records of this shift, as novels, plays, and poetry serve as specific historical records of trends in postmodern thought. The novel clearly addresses the ascendancy of postmodernism in its literary manifestations. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, and Don DeLillo's *White Noise* serve as examples of the growth of postmodernism and provide contexts for our current understanding of this term.

It is difficult to attempt any definition of postmodernism without first establishing its roots in modernism. Modernist writers sought to reconcile the fragmentation and disillusionment that resulted from the horrors of the First World War. No longer able to trust fully in the notion of the teleological nature of history as progressing towards some greater good, modernist writers turned to art to restore their faith in humanity. Although many of the novels of this time reflected despair at the current condition of mankind, writers were able to restore order and establish stability through their work. Thus, a novel like Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* was able to confirm the essential goodness of mankind, even as it registered the depths of human degradation in the onslaught of monopoly capitalism. This kind of response is echoed in the novel's end, when Rose of Sharon breastfeeds a dying man in order to restore him to health. The message is clear: Even when all seems lost, humanity remains, and even in the face of oppression and loss of dignity, the human endeavor is still a collective enterprise.

Although many might maintain that Ellison's *Invisible Man* owes more to modernism than postmodernism in its form and subject matter, its postmodern tendencies clearly illustrate the move away from the modernist understanding of fragmentation as a tragic loss that must be recovered through the restoration of order and search for stability, and *towards* a postmodern celebration of fragmentation in its ability to critique the grand narratives that the emphasis upon order perpetuates. In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard suggests that one of the defining characteristics of postmodernism is its critique of meta-narratives, or the process whereby the totalities suggested by generally accepted modes of thought are revealed to be both contradictory and contingent. Ellison's interrogation of race relations in mid-twentieth century America illustrates this process. Inverting the modernist preoccupation with impressionism and subjectivity, or how we see, Ellison meditates on how we do *not* see, how an entire segment of the American population has been rendered invisible by the homogenizing gaze of racism. Although the novel ends with a resolution of conflict, a modernist trope, this resolution is found in the necessary removal of the nameless narrator from the society he lives in, which has not

afforded him a place. To a large extent, however, the plight of the narrator can be said to be representative of the larger struggle of African-Americans in this country. This example of competing notions of collective struggle and specific individual experience firmly places Ellison on the threshold of postmodern emergence in American literature.

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is more firmly entrenched in the postmodern tradition.¹ Unlike Ellison's nameless narrator, who bears some reference to a larger problem at work in American society, Morrison makes the choice to discuss a unique, rather than representative situation. The idea that all literature by African-American writers must reflect the African-American experience as a whole is one of the meta-narratives that postmodernism seeks to dispel. Published in 1970, *The Bluest Eye* tells the story of Pecola, a poor black girl who is raped and impregnated by her father. Some critics harshly judged Morrison for this choice, but the novel serves as a unique explanation of the "devastation that even casual racial contempt can cause," exploding the myth that racism resides purely in the mind of the oppressor. Morrison traces the method of Pecola's "unbeing," a purely postmodern endeavor. The reader is presented with a shattered world that has no hope of being restored, as Pecola slips into insanity due to the horror of her situation. The narrative is broken into parts to be reassembled by the reader, an extension of the modernist emphasis on the autonomy of the author, which suggests that reader must unpack the novel's meaning in order to arrive at truth. The novel opens with the phrase "Quiet as its kept," an idiomatic expression aimed at initiating the reader into a private world to which otherwise she or he would be denied access. In the following lines, Morrison writes, "'We thought it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow.'" This foregrounding of trivial information and suppression of shocking knowledge is postmodern in practice. Although these words are spoken by a child, and thus bear inquiry into their validity of their reasoning, this conflation of the ordinary with the momentous is reflective of a postmodern approach. While *The Bluest Eye* does not celebrate fragmentation, it suggests inevitability as part of the postmodern condition.

Don DeLillo's *White Noise* is in many ways a radical departure from *Invisible Man* and *The Bluest Eye*. Far from Ellison's tenuous exploration of postmodern characteristics and Morrison's use of them to explain the undoing of a young girl, DeLillo forays into an area that most popularly characterizes postmodernism. Its title is suggestive of the death of distinction and distinguishability, a kind of auditory entropy wherein all sounds become one and nothing is differentiated from anything else. This recognition of the meaningless of humanity is rendered further in DeLillo's implicit critique of academia. Jack Gladney, self-fashioned Chair of Hitler Studies at his university, exclaims, "There are full professors here that read nothing but the backs of cereal boxes." This recognition that all objects of study are equally viable insofar as no universal truths can be determined is reflective of much of the academic environment in the average school of humanities today. Gladney does not serve as a critique of this phenomenon, however, as postmodernism bears no judgments, but merely presents the object for study. Thus, Gladney's choice to name his son Heinrich, in honor of Heinrich Himmler, the chief of police under Hitler and the man most held responsible for the inspiration to use anti-Semitism as a method of organization, rather than just a vehicle for racist violence, carries with it none of the pejorative connotations that would accompany it in modernist writing; the sign is purely divorced from the signified. Imbedded in this example, however, is the justification of

¹ I here use "postmodern tradition" in a large sense and am aware of its inherent contradictoriness. However, for the scope of this paper it is necessary to locate postmodernism in terms of some of its more generally agreed-upon characteristics.

postmodernism in relation to the Holocaust. If man's reason is able to condone genocide in his argument for progress, then surely we must reject the modernist tendency towards closure and stability, which have been so often historically linked with totalitarian philosophies and political formations. Similarly, *White Noise* has no plot, as this would maintain the idea of linear progression, the teleology of which postmodernism rejects. Instead, random events are conjoined into a semi-meaningful schema.

Delillo's work also reflects the move charted by Frederic Jameson in *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Jameson suggests that the distinction between modernism and postmodernism is most clearly defined by a move from a capitalist system ruled by monopolies to its decentralization in a post-industrial, or consumer mode of capitalism. In this system, commodification becomes the means of communication, and knowledge becomes functional, in relation to the matter at hand. We are assaulted by the plethora of choices available for our consumption, whether this is in the form of goods or information. This is clearly related by the consumerism implicit in the daily life of the Gladney family. Pastiche also becomes the preferred narratological method, mimicking our current experience.

Charting *Invisible Man*, *The Bluest Eye*, and *White Noise* in this manner takes three seemingly disparate texts and places them within the American postmodern literary tradition of the latter half of the 20th century. It could be argued that we are now completely divorced from the latent tendency towards realism that informed the modern age, and continually moving towards a heterogeneous global experience. Ellison, who takes on the establishment while refusing to posit the method of its correction, reflects the beginning of the postmodern move away from large social statements or indictments of the human condition. Morrison, by choosing a subject that defied her categorization as a representative African-American author, reinforced the postmodern insistence on the locality and specificity of experience. Delillo, in rejecting a plot as necessary for a novel to exist as such, and in elucidating the meaningless of institutions in a world which rejects ontological truisms, is suggestive of the current fragmentation of human experience. Each author clearly reflects the movement towards the validity of postmodernism as descriptive of the human condition.

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ENGLISH MA COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION

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HIGH PASS

PASS

FAIL

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

This is one of the best examination essays that I have ever read on the subject. The writer has a firm grasp of the primary materials, an easy familiarity with the critical contexts into which he or she places them, and a sophisticated critical vocabulary. Stellar!

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FAIL

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

Very well-organized and detailed, with an excellent argument and exemplary use of informing theory.