

Swarthmore College

Honors Examination
Professor Keith Cartwright, Examiner
University of North Florida

English 116 Literature of the US South
Spring 2016

Open Book—Open Notes

Respond to any three questions below via thoughtfully organized essays of roughly equal length. Although you may refer to the same shorter text (essay, story, poem, etc.) in more than one essay, do not rely upon the same novel as a primary text of discussion in more than one question. You need not respond to every single question or statement in the prompt. Frame an essayistic argument, follow the basic contours of the prompt questions, and run with it.

The questions are weighted as equal thirds of your overall grade. So try to finish each one within an hour apiece.

Develop an appropriate introduction to open up (and configure) your thoughts for each essay, moving towards a lucid thesis. Then develop the body of your essay with reference to (and analysis of) appropriate examples you've chosen from the texts upon which you base your essayistic response. You may reference any scholars or cultural critics of your choosing, but be sure that your own views, voice, and perspectives are "driving" each essay. Finish with a conclusion that provides some sense of what is at stake in your analysis and that restates or "tweaks" your essay's thesis—from the perspective of knowing, in the end, the terrain your essay has covered and exactly what it is you want to affirm.

Question #1:

What is gained by reading the black writers you have read in this course from within a "Southern Literature" framework? Within this framework, what might we learn about Afro-southern texts and the lived experience behind their production that might read differently if these texts were engaged primarily in relation to other U.S. African American authors? Think about how your readings of Harriet Jacobs, Zora Neale Hurston, or Albert Murray might have been shaped in powerful ways by your readings of Margaret Mitchell, Kate Chopin, William Faulkner, or Joel Chandler Harris (or any pairing of your choice from across the syllabus). Focus on at least two writers, two texts.

Question #2

Consider how the quest or ritual journey works in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* and how it may function similarly (in its motifs, stages, landscapes, goals, etc.) or in *wild contrast* to the workings of any other southern quest narrative you may have read (Hurston, Welty, Faulkner, Dixon, etc). Think not only of what the characters may face (the avatars or Avatars of the narratives) but what the reader faces in navigating the terrain and virtual realities of the text. How is the text itself set up as a terrain of the reader's journey? What do you take away from the southern spaces (Ibo Landings, Big Woods, Mucks, Swamplandias) of such a journey?

Question #3

Your seminar syllabus calls attention to “[Jennifer] Greeson’s comments that ‘Gothic’ elements appeared in anti-slavery writings that stressed how beautiful consumer goods like coffee, sugar, cotton were shadowed by the bodies of slaves who helped produce them” [see Greeson’s citation from a 1789 issue of *Columbian Magazine* below]:

The beautiful colors with which our ladies are adorned; the cotton with which they line their stays; the coffee, the chocolate on which they breakfast; the red with which they heighten their complexions—all these the hand of the miserable negro prepares for them. Tender women! you weep at tragedies, and yet what affords you pleasure is bathed with the tears, and stained with the blood of your fellow creatures! (qtd in Greeson 94).

My question is this: how do any two or three of the southern writers/artists you’ve encountered give you a very material or architectural sense for—as Professor Schmidt puts it—“how we are *still* haunted by nightmarish specters of slavery and slaves’ anger”? In other words, in our own consumer era, how might your readings of Jacobs, Chopin, Taylor, Percy, Welty, Faulkner, Margaret Mitchell, Alice Randall, Kara Walker, etc., show something of the world that slavery materialized and keeps—somehow—materializing? How do lives matter, or not, in the world these texts reveal to us?

Question #4

How do southern folk forms fit into the matrix of southern/American modernism? To what degree does authorial/readerly immersion in southern folk music, narrative, or other aspects of southern popular culture give form to a literature of complex, multi-perspectival (doubly or triply conscious) modernity? How do these folk-infused texts handle the tension between a traumatically disempowering plantation-built space and a limber/limbo consciousness of the space’s larger psychic resources and forces of movement and transition? Or do you want to argue that you often see something else at work: seemingly authoritative representations of folk forms and popular life that work as a magisterial “command performance” to convince readers that all is right with the stratified powers/authorities/authorial world of our souths and our nation? Focus upon at least *two* authors in detail. Consider any writers from Joel Chandler Harris, Charles Chestnut, and Thomas Dixon (all arguably early moderns) to Hurston, Murray, Faulkner, or Welty, etc.

Question #5

Consider the perspective upon freedom and captivity offered by Harriet Jacobs’ “loophole of retreat.” How might your steady immersions in southern literature at Swarthmore offer unanticipated perspectives on American freedom and captivity... opened via loopholes of retreat? I urge you to ground your introductory paragraph in thoughts and perspectives upon Jacobs’ figure of “retreat” (perhaps informed by Kevin Young’s responses to Jacobs). Then move to consider how any number of southern texts—from Brer Rabbit’s forays from/to the briar patch to Margaret Mitchell or Eudora Welty, Peter Taylor or Walker Percy, Richard Wright or Charles Chesnutt, or any pairing(s) of your choosing—may help us script visions of freedom from amidst the most deeply entrenched racial, gender, class, or sexual captivities. Start with ideas developed from Jacobs and offer a focussed application of these ideas in response to at least two other texts. Try to get at the stakes, gains, value of your deep immersion in southern literature by thinking in terms of its often hauntingly traumatic loopholes of retreat. What is the key “take-away” for you?

