English 117B Spring 2016

(Recycled) **Sample Final Exam Question with Sample Answer**

This is the sample exam question I read out in class today—a relic from an earlier semester’s actual final exam (not just a “mini-final” such as you will take). I’m sorry I’m too tired to write a new one for you right now, but I’ll try to get something posted before the “mini-final” next week so you will have a sense of what’s coming. One difference is that I’ll ask you to write about just TWO works, not 3.

Also, I’m not giving you a *whole* answer—I didn’t have time to write one back then, either--and since I’m writing this on a computer at my leisure, not with a pen and paper under pressure, my answer is a lot longer and more polished than I expect yours to be. Also, I deliberately picked the most complicated, political topic because that’s the one I decided for certain not to use. The topics you get will not require any particular knowledge outside of what you learned in class, though you will be commenting on the human experience as you understand it.

**The Question:**

**History:** (personal and societal): Several works we discussed this semester deal with history, telling a story from the past in a way that reflects concerns of the present. Sometimes the stories concern a tale that is so old--and often so odd—that it can be called legend, rather than historical fact, but these semi-mythic tales can operate like history, too, for those who believe them, even metaphorically.

Works of this kind usually explore these questions: Whose version of the past gets precedence when there are competing versions? How is the historical record transformed in art, for good or ill? How can our recollections and interpretations of past events be used to serve the needs of the present? How do our interpretations of history (whether of our family, community, nation, species, or the cosmos) shape our ideas about future possibilities?

If you choose this question, discuss three different stories, including both readings and films, that deal with this theme in a central way. You can take one or more (but not too many!) of the questions outlined above as your thesis question, with your answer to it being your thesis.

Suggestions of works to use: *The Tain,* *Translations, The Hanging Gale, Michael Collins*, *Cry Freedom*, *Whale Rider, TransAtlantic: A Novel*, “Home to Harlem,” *Sweet Land*

**Sample of an introduction, thesis statement, and topic sentences that could spring from the above question**, using The Hanging Gale, Cry Freedom, and TransAtlantic “Freeman.”

The difference between history and legend--historical fact and historical fiction--seems very distinct to those who don’t listen in on the fierce arguments professional historians get into when they try to defend their different, sometimes diametrically opposed interpretations of historical events. I realized this semester, when we were discussing *The Hanging Gale*, *Cry Freedom*, and *TransAtlantic,* among other stories, that writers of historical fiction might also have an argument to make when they depict the inner thoughts, private lives, and public struggles of historical figures, and when they show how the people whose stories history doesn’t record coped with the great events of their time. In some cases these writers also seemed to be using historical fiction to influence the present course of events by shaping or reshaping their readers’ attitudes about the past.

For example, in the three works listed above, the societies depicted were all in conflict over the rights of a ruling minority and a suppressed majority, whether in Ireland during the Great Hunger or in South Africa during apartheid. In all three stories, the ruling class tried to make the underclass believe it was an inherently inferior people that should be grateful for the leadership of its rulers, and that the underclass should try to emulate the ruler’s culture as much as possible, shedding their own. In all three stories, though, the writer (and/or filmmaker) showed the underclass to be so admirable in dealing with injustice and hardship that the ideology of the ruling class was exposed as a fiction in itself, and a malicious, self-serving one. And in all cases, these three stories were told at a time when their particular message could be seen as a direct comment on current events, told in a way that might influence the outcome of current controversies.

Topic sentence one: *The Hanging Gale*, written long after the terrible famine it depicts, shows attitudes that are still in operation in our world today, where a ruling class (here the English and the Protestant Irish who ruled the disenfranchised Catholic majority) tells self-flattering stories about its own superiority to justify its continued exploitation of an underclass it sees as inferior.

[Then I’d describe the scene where Townsend discusses the plight of the starving Irish tenants with the bigoted Protestant minister, and I’d relate that to the similar conversations we have in America about the extremely poor people in (or from) the “third world” who are often blamed for their own poverty, even by the people whose policies have wrecked the poor people’s economy. I might use the US and the Mexicans as an example, as our economic policies have driven many farmers there out of business, drawing them to “El Norte” to work as migrant farmworkers. I might also discuss how The Hanging Gale shows that “underclass,” particularly the Phelans, to have many admirable qualities, though I’d add that it showed both the Irish and their overlords as human, not as villains and saints.]

Topic sentence two: Similarly, in *Cry Freedom*, the ruling white minority imposed its own culture on the black African majority to the extent that it could and based its right to rule on the self-serving fiction that the whites had built all that was good in South Africa and thus deserved the lion’s share of its bounty. Even the most impressive, most admirable of the black Africans, Steve Biko, admitted that when he was growing up under this system, he had been imposed on by the ideology, believing his own people must be inferior to the whites and must, in a sense, deserve to be subservient.

[Then I’d discuss a particular scene, probably the courtroom scene where Biko cooly and even wittily faces down the white judge, deconstructing the white supremacist arguments.]

Topic sentence three: Finally, in *Transatlantic*, we see how both America and Ireland in the 1840s had a similar system that kept an exploitative ruling class in power by convincing an underclass (enslaved African-Americans and suppressed, disenfranchised Irish Catholics, respectively) that it was inherently inferior and incapable of taking charge of its own affairs. In his depiction of a historical figure, Frederick Douglass, and a fictional character, Lily, Colum McCann shows how the stories of individuals can refute the self-serving, utterly false narratives of ruling classes.

[For support, I would probably focus on the scene where Douglass tries to challenge the rich Anglo-Irish hosts at the dinner Webb brings him to, as that scene parallels the one I focused on in The Hanging Gale. I would treat Lily’s story more briefly, just pointing out that Douglass’ example of an individual whose story showed he could rise above the lies told about his people inspired her to do the same.]