

Final Examination Questions

The final for this course is an essay examination, which will be held on Monday, May 9 from 11:50 to 1:40 in Eisenhower Hall 218. Please bring a blank blue book or blank loose-leaf paper for your answers. You may not use your books or your notes.

I will provide you with questions selected from the following list. You will write an essay in response to *three* of them. The final arrangement of the questions will allow for some choice.

1. In her 1996 essay on *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Jane Smiley expresses dismay over the novel's prominent place in American literary history. For literary and moral reasons, she thinks the novel does not deserve to be the "definitive" American novel and suggests *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a more worthy replacement. What do you think of Smiley's argument?

Write an essay that summarizes Smiley's primary objections to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and evaluates them using a careful analysis of the novel. Your essay may also include a reading of the novel within its nineteenth-century context and/or information about the history of critical responses to it.

2. Write an essay that compares Alcott's ideas and attitudes about education to Twain's ideas and attitudes about education. How does each author, represent education? What are the most important elements of their thinking about education? What are their purposes behind such ideas and images about education? Your essay should make reference to at least two texts by Alcott and at least two by Twain.

3. How does Alcott represent men and boys? Write an essay that examines Alcott's representation of men and boys and critically discusses her ideas, attitudes, and images of boyhood and masculinity. Your essay should use examples from at least three of the following texts to illustrate and support its claims: *Hospital Sketches*, "Behind a Mask," *Little Women*, "Psyche's Art," *Little Men*, "How I Went Out to Service," "Transcendental Wild Oats," *Eight Cousins*, or *Jo's Boys*.

4. "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg" and "The Mysterious Stranger" are often seen as representative pieces from Twain's "late, dark period." Do these two tales seem bitter or dark to you? Do they, as some critics have argued, lack the laugh-out-loud humor of his previous works? In what ways do the themes of these texts seem to differ from earlier works? How is the genre, form, or style of these late works different, if at all, from Twain's earlier works?

Using examples from "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg" and/or "The Mysterious Stranger" as well as examples from earlier texts, write an essay that examines Twain's "late, dark period" within the context of his whole career.

5. Imagine that in an attempt to improve the overall literacy of Kansas State graduates, Pat Bosco and Jon Wefald are preparing for distribution a "List of Books That Every Student Should Read Before They Leave College." After hearing about your expertise in Alcott and Twain studies, they have emailed you with a query that asks, "Do you think we should include Alcott and/or Twain on the list? If so, which texts and why? If not, why not?"

Write a detailed response that provides your suggestions as well as a rationale for your decisions.

6. Twain and Alcott both had their first big literary successes in the 1860s with the publication of nonfiction sketches, *Hospital Sketches* and *Innocents Abroad*. Compare these two works, discussing their differences and similarities. Do these texts contain the qualities that would later appear in their authors' classic fiction? Or do these early works differ in important ways from the mature works by Alcott and Twain?

7. Using only texts written by the author, explain Mark Twain's attitudes toward race. What are the most important features of his thinking about race? How does he express those ideas in novels such as *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Pudd'nhead Wilson*? Should modern readers despise, admire, or take some other approach to Twain's attitudes toward race?

8. Before she wrote novels of self-denial and self-sacrifice for children (*Little Women*, for example), Alcott authored dozens of sensational "thrillers"—popular, anonymously authored tales of romance, revenge, crime, deception, and passion ("Behind a Mask," for example). Critics have often found it difficult to agree on an explanation of the shift from the thrillers to the children's fiction or on an understanding of the relationship between the two. Some critics (Ann Douglas, for example) insist that the thrillers are evidence of Alcott's "double literary life." Other critics (Estes and Lant, for instance) see not a divide, but a continuity between these texts and these aspects of Alcott's career.

Write an essay in which you discuss the relationship of Alcott's early thrillers to her later fiction. You will want to use a careful examination of Alcott texts, but you may also make use of relevant criticism and biography or autobiography.

9. Twain is perhaps most well known for his boy books and boy characters, while Alcott is perhaps most well known for her girl books and girl characters. Indeed, Huck may be the most important boy in nineteenth-century American fiction, and Jo the most important girl. Given what you know about the careers and works of both writers, do you think these reputations are more or less justified?