Sample Literature Comprehensive/Qualifying Exam

This exam involves writing two take-home passport essays. You will have 72 hours from the time you receive the exam to complete it.

Choose one prompt from each section and write a 1500 word (minimum word count) essay for each prompt. Each essay should engage at least 3 works from your first year of graduate coursework at USM. Each essay should choose a representative selection of texts from an historical span of at least 100 years. In crafting your response, you will want to compare literary texts, putting key themes and concepts in conversation with each other while staying mindful of national, periodic, and generic distinctions between authors and texts. A strong essay will demonstrate your capacity for synthetic thinking by drawing upon a variety of readings and engaging those readings critically. The focus of your interpretations and argument must be on the primary sources you have chosen. You can draw on secondary sources if you wish, but they should only be used as a way to illuminate your analysis and discussion of the primary sources.

Section A: (choose one)

A.1.: In one way or another, many texts that are now canonical were, at the time of their publication, formally innovative, experimental, or even groundbreaking. How do innovations with regard to formal generic expectations—e.g. meter, narrative form, tone, narrative/lyrical voice, stage direction, rhyme scheme—allow authors to address new ideas, topics, and concerns?

A.2.: In *Reading for the Plot*, Peter Brooks discusses the importance of considering why a story is being told and what the telling of the story aims to accomplish: “There can be a range of reasons for telling a story, from the self-interested to the altruistic. Seduction appears as a predominant motive, be it specifically erotic and oriented toward the capture of the other, or more nearly narcissistic, even exhibitionistic, asking for admiration and attention. Yet perhaps aggression is nearly as common, and, of course, often inextricably linked to the erotic: a forcing of attention, a violation of the listener.” Consider the reasons for telling in three texts from your list. The “teller” can be the narrator or can be a character (who isn’t a narrator) within the text that tells a story.You may want to consider if the telling accomplishes its aims and how the reason for telling shapes the story itself.

Section B (choose one)

B.1.: “We act as if that being of a man or that being of a woman is actually an internal reality or something that is simply true about us, a fact about us, but actually it’s a phenomenon that is being produced all the time and reproduced all the time, so to say gender is performative is to say that nobody really is a gender from the start.” – Judith Butler

Literary representations of gender offer readers opportunities to study the performance of gender when it works and when it fails. The failure, on the part of male and female characters, to perform their gender appropriately often produces narrative conflict, whereas obedient reproduction of gender roles can lead to resolution or “success” for characters. Choose three texts that span a 200-year historical period and develop an argument for *if* and how literature reveals the phenomena of gender production.

B.2.: “[The Poet] considers man and nature as essentially adapted to each other, and the mind of man as naturally the mirror of the fairest and most interesting qualities of nature.” William Wordsworth, “Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802)

Write an essay about the relationship between humans and nature, and the extent to which nature and humankind may be thought to be “essentially adapted to each other.” Note that your response is to the quotation and it is not necessary to read its source. However, do not forget to take account of national, periodic and generic distinctions as you proceed.