

FINAL ORALS LIST
Sample 1

GROUP 1: Stéphane Mallarmé

Poetry:

Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard — Stéphane Mallarmé

Prose:

Crise de vers — Stéphane Mallarmé

Mimique — Stéphane Mallarmé

Theory:

The Death of Stéphane Mallarmé — Leo Bersani

GROUP 2: Questions of High and Low

Paintings:

Olympia — Edouard Manet

A Modern Olympia — Paul Cézanne

Theory:

Notes on Camp — Susan Sontag

Avant Garde and Kitsch — Clement Greenberg

The Painted Word — Tom Wolfe

The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction — Walter Benjamin

GROUP 3: Questions of Authorship and Attribution

Books:

A Fan's Notes — Frederick Exley

The Argonauts — Maggie Nelson

Autobiography of Red — Anne Carson

Theory:

The Death of the Author — Roland Barthes

GROUP 4: Questions of Hybridity in Journalism and Essay

Books:

In Cold Blood — Truman Capote

Articles/Essays:

The American Male, Age 10 — Susan Orlean

Upon this Rock — John Jeremiah Sullivan

Frank Sinatra Has a Cold — Gay Talese

The New Journalism — Tom Wolfe

Late Victorians — Richard Rodriguez

Devil's Bait — Leslie Jamison

INTELLECTUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Sample 1

My thesis argued for a reconciliation of sorts between two unlikely works—Mallarmé’s lifelong attempt to write the ultimate Book and his magazine on fashion, authored under a series of pseudonyms. The comparison aimed to rattle several apparent divisions between the two texts—the division between high and low art, between poetry and prose, and between the authors to whom they were attributed (Mallarmé himself or the pseudonyms he adopted or if, indeed, there was to be an author at all). Although the thesis crystallized my efforts to trouble these boundaries, the tensions at their core have been present throughout my academic career. I have attempted to organized the following clusters to illustrate, in semi-chronological order, how the themes at the heart of my thesis emerged from my studies of the past four years. I do not mean to draw strict parallels between these works and my thesis, merely to demonstrate the similarity of the questions they posed.

The first cluster centers on three works of Mallarmé’s and one theory text *on* Mallarmé which were foundational in my approach to the thesis project. I clustered these texts not only for their common relation to Mallarmé, but also for a similar impulse in their argument. In Jacques Derrida’s *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*, he levies a critique of Structuralism by pointing out that its methodology (namely, calling attention to and codifying the organizing principles of a system) always implied a fixed point of origin, a ground on which the structure is conceived (Derrida mentions *telos*, God, man, *aletheia*, consciousness, *eidos*, among others)—in his words, a “center.” In the lecture, Derrida proposes a new notion—one which would become ‘central’ to post-Structuralism—a decentering: an organization where even the governing principle is subject to a system of differences and relations. I mention this lecture, because this first group of works (and some of the others) coheres on the grounds of their common effort to undermine “centers” or at least to move away from them.

Un coup de dés, one of Mallarmé's most famous poems, realizes this effort most literally, in its modernist play with space, typography, and legibility. Mallarmé shatters the conventional poetic line and stanza, unfolding his poem instead over several spread out pages, inviting the eye to read up, down, across and over, in lieu of the standard left-to-right. In *Crise de vers*, the poet observes a similar rejection of structure taking place across all of French poetry as free verse begins to edge out the French alexandrine. Like Derrida, who calls his new structure a "disruption," Mallarmé see the arrival of free verse as "une inquiétude du voile dans le temple."¹ *Mimique*, likewise, describes a pantomime in the act of a radical kind of mimesis: one without an *original* to copy from; one which is "une allusion perpétuelle" or "un milieu, pur, de fiction."² The mime's representation, in other words, is a kind of original copy, a sign without an initial referent. The final text, Bersani's *The Death of Stéphane Mallarmé*, takes the same approach to Mallarmé's poetic project as a whole. Using the poet's self-declared death ("Je suis mort," he writes to Théodore Aubanel in 1866"³), Bersani probes the extremes of what it means for the poet to have "displace[d] the authorship of his poems from his defunct self to the universe."⁴ He wrests Mallarmé's oeuvre of even the center of their common author.

The second cluster of works is concerned with the value of art at the meeting grounds of highbrow and lowbrow culture. Manet's *Olympia* jump-started Modernism in French painting: it portrays a reclining prostitute addressing the viewer with an accusatory stare. Manet painted without the conventional shading technique *chiaroscuro*, making the lines bold and brash, and based the composition on Titian's famous *Venus of Urbino*, which underscored for contemporary audiences the painting's position at the intersection of bourgeois and working culture. This same concern—of

¹ Mallarmé, 367.

² Mallarmé, 378.

³ Bersani, 5.

⁴ Bersani, 6.

elevating lower class culture by appropriating bourgeois forms (or vice versa, or ensuring the two remain discrete)—is also at play in the four works of theory. Clement Greenberg’s essay, *Avant Garde and Kitsch*, insists upon the boundary separating the high “avant-garde” works which exist only for themselves (“l’art pour l’art”), and the low “kitsch” products, which were commercial, accessible and produced for public consumption. Benjamin polices a similar line, asking in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, whether the “aura” of an original work is degraded in the process of mass reproduction. Sontag’s *Notes on Camp*, takes the inverse line of thinking, musing elliptically on the pleasures of “camp” —a notion not far from Greenberg’s “kitsch.”

Tom Wolfe’s *The Painted Word* makes a much broader claim—that there has been a genre dissolution between painting and literature, that critical theory has become the mechanism by which avant-garde artists are found, shaped and celebrated. But a large part of this appropriation of painting by literature, Wolfe writes, has to do with class signifiers, and ensuring the high remains demarcated from the low and middle. In the second chapter, for example, Wolfe describes the process (he calls it “the Apache dance”) whereby avant-garde artists are uplifted by members of the *beau monde*: “there is a peculiarly modern reward that the avant-garde artists can give his benefactor: namely, the feeling that he, like his mate the artist, is separate from and aloof from the bourgeoisie, the middle classes.”⁵

The third group of texts revolves around the question of authorship. Just as Derrida calls attention to the reliance of Structuralist paradigms to make use of a “ground” or “center,” so Barthes, in *The Death of the Author*, critiques the overestimation on the part of Western readers of the author’s role in a work. And just as Derrida demands a radical “decentering,” so Barthes endorses an understanding of text as “multiple writings, issuing from several cultures and entering into dialogue

⁵ Wolfe, 19.

with each other, into parody, into contestation.”⁶ All three of the accompanying texts imply a similar concern—each explores the question of where a text’s point of origin truly lies. Frederick Exley’s *A Fan’s Notes*, for example, is labeled a “fictional memoir.” In a prefatory note, Exley writes, “Though the events in this book bear similarity to those of that long malaise, my life, many of the characters and happenings are creations solely of the imagination.”⁷ The protagonist and author share a name, a sensibility, and many life experiences. But the fictional Exley had a wife, a mental institutionalization and several adventures that his creator did not. Throughout the “memoir,” it is unclear where the real Exley ends and the fictional one begins.

Anne Carson’s *Autobiography of Red* creates a similar conundrum, as it is not an autobiography in the conventional sense—it is a book of fictional poems, ostensibly translations or reinterpretations of a lost work by the Greek poet Stesichoros, not told in the first person or, seemingly, “by” the color red. In the early pages of the book, however, Carson notes that adjectives do the work of determining the window through which a reader sees a noun (“When Homer mentions blood, blood is *black*. When women appear; women are *neat-ankled* or *glancing*”⁸). Appropriately, the color appears throughout the book, finding its way into where ever the novel wanders: in its protagonist, in volcanos, in sunsets and in feelings. If autobiography traditionally tells a subject’s story from their own point of view, Carson’s text tells that story through the lens of an adjective; through the color red.

Nelson’s text, finally, seems to both affirm and contradict Barthes’ argument. On the one hand, the book is deeply personal—it details the inner-workings of Nelson’s relationship with her partner, her thoughts on queer identity, and the biological and emotional changes of pregnancy and birth. But even as it is inseparable from its author, *The Argonauts*, also embodies what Barthes

⁶ Barthes, 6.

⁷ Exley, vii.

⁸ Carson, 4.

described as “multiple writings” in the most explicit sense. Nelson regularly cites other texts, moving seamlessly between quotes and her own words, demarcating the foreign voices only with italics and a small note in the margin. *The Argonauts* is simultaneously a tapestry of voices and entirely singular.

The final group centers on a subject towards which the others have gestured, and which plays a significant role in my thesis—the hybridization or mixing of genres. The book and all six essays straddle the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, between the literary and the journalistic, between novel, essay, and report. Each work, like *La Dernière mode* itself, could make a case against the usefulness of such categories at all.

Comparative Literature Oral Exam
Sample 2

Group 1: “Elite” Culture in the Marketplace: Art as Commodity

Texts:

James, Henry. “Collaboration” and “The Real Thing” in *Complete Stories 1892-1898* (New York: The Library of America, 1996), pp. 234-255 and 32-57. Print.

Lawrence, D.H. “Things” in *The Complete Stories of D.H. Lawrence* (New York: The Viking Press, 1961), III, pp. 844-853.

Reza, Yasmina. *Art*, trans. Christopher Hampton. (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1996). Print.

Reza, Yasmina. “Art.” Inaugural performance, directed by Patrice Kerbat, starring Fabrice Luchini, Pierre Arditi and Pierre Vaneck. Paris, Comédie Des Champs Elysées, 1994.
<http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x66105>

Theory:

Bourdieu, Pierre. “The Market of Symbolic Goods” in *Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. Ed. Randal Johnson. New York: Columbia University Press, 1983. Print. 112-141.

Morris, William. “The Aims of Art” in *William Morris, Poet, Artist, Socialist* (New York: Twentieth Century Press), pp. 189-207.

Sommer, Doris. “Art and Accountability.” *The Work of Art in the World*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014). Print.

Group 2: Visual Art and Its Boundaries: On the Blending of Aesthetic and Emotional Lives

Texts:

Balzac, Honoré de. “Le chef d’oeuvre inconnu” in *La Comédie Humaine: études de moeurs: scenes de la vie de campagne*. (Paris: Gallimard, 1949). Print.

--- “Sarrasine.” *La Comédie Humaine: études de moeurs: scenes de la vie de campagne*. (Paris: Gallimard, 1949). Print.

Ovid. “Pygmalion and the Statue.” *Metamorphoses*. Book X. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972). Print. Lines 243-297.

Theory:

Malraux, André. “Le Musée imaginaire.” *Voix du Silence*. (Paris: NRF, 1951). Print.

Ruskin, John. “Of the Pathetic Fallacy.” *Modern Painters*, vol. 3, part IV. First American Editin. (New York: John Wiley, 1863). Print. 156-172.

Tolstoy, Leo. *What Is Art?* trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: The Penguin Group, 1995). Print.

Group 3: Mapping Consciousness in Modernist Fiction

Texts:

Joyce, James. "A Mother." *Dubliners*. (New York, NY: Signet Classics, 2007). pp. 139-154. Print.

Proust, Marcel. *Du Côte de Chez Swann*. (Paris: Gallimard, 1922). Print.

Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs. Dalloway*. (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1925). Print.

---. *To the Lighthouse*. (New York: Harcourt Inc., 1927). Print.

Theory:

Bersani, Leo. "Fantasies of the Self and the World." *Marcel Proust: The Fictions of Life and of Art*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). Print. 21-55.

Rose, Phyllis. "Bloomsbury." *Woman of Letters: A Life of Virginia Woolf*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978. Print. 31-47.

Group 4: The Didactic Economics of Pre-Victorian British Women: Economic Narratology and Its Aspirations

Texts:

Edgeworth, Maria. "The Birthday Present." *The Parent's Assistant*. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1897). Print.

--- "The Bracelets." *The Parent's Assistant*. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1897). Print.

---"The Orphans." *The Parent's Assistant*. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1897). Print.

Inchbald, Elizabeth. *Nature and Art*. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1997). Print.

Martineau, Harriet. "A Manchester Strike." *Illustrations of Political Economy*. Vol. 3. (Boston: Leonard C. Bowles, 1832). Print.

Theory:

Keynes, John Maynard. "Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren." *Essays in Persuasion*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2010). 321-332. Print.

Comparative Literature Oral Exam
Intellectual Autobiography
Sample 2

The opportunity to explore a wide range of topics and texts as a Comparative Literature undergraduate has been an invaluable academic experience and one for which I feel an immense amount of gratitude. Looking back on my intellectual trajectory, I am especially thankful to have been able to combine work from multiple fields, often bridging the social sciences and the humanities. Moreover, my interest in the visual and performing arts inspired me to undertake a “panaesthetic” approach towards my study of literature. This has perhaps been the most enduring thread in my work.

While pursuing a Secondary in Economics, I quickly became interested in art and literature markets of the modern era. I began by investigating the early life and work of John Maynard Keynes, his own artistic sensibilities, and, in particular, his tenure as president of the London Artists’ Association. The Association’s aim of providing contemporary artists, including many of Keynes’ friends, with a steady income seemed to challenge the value of aesthetic individuality and to raise questions regarding the status of the artist in the marketplace. These concerns also pointed to a larger issue motivating my curiosity: I wondered whether (and how) monetary forces confer legitimacy on a work of art or whether they instead debase aesthetic production. This debate forms the crux of the first cluster of works on my oral examination list.

In particular, this issue seems to exist between sociological and aesthetic theories, and Pierre Bourdieu’s piece, “The Market of Symbolic Goods,” which I read during my first Comparative Literature course (“Literature 96: Grounds for Comparison”) became a focal point in many of my academic investigations going forward. I was troubled by Bourdieu’s attempt to theorize hierarchies of cultural publics, corresponding to hierarchies of cultural production, and I

began to test his conclusions against some of my favorite twentieth-century French works, including Marguerite Duras' *L'Amant*, and Yasmina Reza's play, *Art*, which I encountered in in Sophomore Tutorial ("Literature 97"). Reza directly explores the sociological complexity of art markets, as she links cultural prestige to the monetary value of a work, while undermining economic concerns as a primary criterion for aesthetic legitimacy. Crucial to my engagement with the play was Doris Sommer's chapter on "Art and Accountability" for both its discussion of innate aesthetic judgement and its commentary on the public, communal, and even revolutionary, function of art.¹

Yet, in my Junior Tutorial, I also began to contrast these material and monetary aspects of a work of art with its emotional and symbolic value. I became intrigued by the interpersonal aspects of aesthetic engagement that underpin economic valuations, and I sought a fuller understanding of art in social life. I realized I loved Reza's play for its incisive treatment of a delicate friendship and the way in which different approaches to art affect or reveal varying styles of intimacy in Reza's characters. Reading the short fiction of D.H. Lawrence and Henry James similarly opened avenues through which I could explore the implications of economic activity and art production on social life. Focusing on art in the marketplace thus morphed into tracing broader questions of class, vocation, materialism, and the veneration of beauty.

This led me towards Tolstoy's conception of art as that which conveys emotion; *What Is Art?* resonated with me personally, and I found that Tolstoy's definition offered the most comprehensive grounding for the remainder of my tutorial work. I was increasingly drawn to

¹ In this vein, I also focused on French theater in particular as a site of revolution, through works such as Beaumarchais' *Le Mariage de Figaro* and Jean Anhouil's *Antigone*. This background helped me understand the ways in which Reza's *Art* relies on, and achieves, mass public engagement.

fiction featuring artists as protagonists, fascinated by the way authors portrayed their romantic and social lives. I specifically began looking at the ways these characters, who should be the most aesthetically rigorous, often mischaracterize others by virtue of their own work. Initially, this involved considering the Pygmalion myth and its many reincarnations, as I wondered how the modern caution against confusing art and reality developed from the optimism of Ovid's account. I found that Honoré de Balzac offered the most interesting reimagining of the problematic emotional life of the artist in relation to his work. In "Le chef d'oeuvre inconnu" and "Sarrasine," Balzac explores the limits of aesthetic realism, both on a literal level, as his characters blend the realms of art and love to disastrous results, and on a meta-textual level. In this vein, I also became interested in the problem of endowing art objects with life in connection with Ruskin's concept of the "pathetic fallacy" and sentimentality.

This theme became a major focus of my junior essay entitled "Creating an Aesthetic System: Marcel Proust on John Ruskin, Society, Objects, and the Self," as I sought to understand Ruskin as an aesthetic mentor for Proust. I concentrated on the Swann and Odette love story, and the ways in which visual art and music act as mediators for their connection. Again, Swann makes a categorization failure, falling for someone not his "genre" or "type," and his reliance on aesthetic markers proves misguided. Understanding the ways in which Swann fails as a critic in both his personal and professional life also opened up new avenues of inquiry into Proust's vision for his own criticism.

Running parallel to my consideration of in the emotional dimensions of art was an interest in the physical manifestations of intellectual and creative space. As I looked at the ways in which the emotional, symbolic and aesthetic invaded the social worlds of fictional characters, I also became aware of the spaces in which these characters were, and were not, able to operate. I

attempted to understand times in which social positioning was at odds with aesthetic production, specifically in modernist fiction. Virginia Woolf's novels provided the most fruitful examples for considering *gendered* intellectual and physical spaces in particular, which Phyllis Rose's description of Bloomsbury helped me put into context. Similarly, in James Joyce's, "A Mother," I was particularly intrigued by the restrictions on Mrs. Kearney's movements and how physical space affects her ability to achieve artistic and monetary success for her daughter. My attention to fictive physical environments soon carried over into my study of Proust, as I became fascinated by the complex liminal spaces between the symbolic and the corporeal realms in *A la recherche du temps perdu*. I traced the ways in which Proust's narrator seeks both to incorporate his environment into his mental space and to imprint his consciousness on the landscape, as an argument in favor of a closer blending of the two spheres. In many ways, my thesis project came out of this intellectual investigation, as I began to focus on the function of religious spaces in the novel before transitioning to a study of the cathedral structure in Proust's criticism.

Finally, in a slightly different vein, my economic and literary interests came together last fall in a seminar on "Money in English Literature," which allowed me to explore how female authors in England described their economic environment in the early stages of the industrial revolution. I was particularly interested in the ways in which they theorized childhood and engaged in didactic endeavors. I traced words associated both with progeny and money, such as "labor," "seed," "maturity," and "entrust," while paying particularly close attention to the concept of replication. I hope to continue to study "Economic Narratology" and understand how economic concepts benefit from the narrative form.

I remain intrigued and puzzled by many of these topics, which I know will continue to structure my academic exploration going forward. The fact that I am still so inspired by this work

is a testament to the incredible guidance I received from Comparative Literature faculty and students as my initially esoteric interests took shape. Joining the Comparative Literature department gave me an intellectual home, and I am very appreciative of all I was able to accomplish over the last four years.