

MFA FICTION EXAMINATION

Please return a 15-to-20 page length typed essay by Monday, October 27, at 10:00 a.m., either as a hard copy or as an email attachment. If you quote or refer to outside sources, please identify them.

“The longest way round is the shortest way home.”

—James Joyce, *Ulysses* (1922)

“It’s not the place that makes you who you are. It’s the people you meet, the ones who change your heart.”

—Julia Alvarez, *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994)

Across much of modern and contemporary fiction, the question of place becomes inseparable from the question of identity. Writers use place as both a grounding force and a site of rupture, shaping who their characters are and how they come to understand themselves.

Considering these ideas, construct an essay in which you examine how the novels on your list, along with your own creative work, interrogate the relationship between place and character. What do these places represent to these characters? How do these meanings shift as characters navigate between different places or reckon with the act of leaving and returning? In what ways is their identity shaped or reshaped by movement, distance, or the pull of home?

Discuss how at least two novels from your own reading list and two from the MFA program’s suggested list use place (consider landscape, geography, histories, and/or its mythologies) as a way of exploring broader questions related to selfhood and/or belonging. In what ways have these writers influenced your understanding of writing about place in your own fiction? How does your work continue upon or challenge their approaches to the relationship between place and identity?

You must make use of at least two works from your own part of the list and two from the MFA program's suggested list of books.

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“When we look at a good deal of serious modern fiction, and particularly Southern fiction, we find this quality about it that is generally described, in a pejorative sense, as grotesque...In these grotesque works, we find that the writer has made alive some experience which we are not accustomed to observe every day, or which the ordinary man may never experience in his ordinary life. We find that connections which we would expect in the customary kind of realism have been ignored, that there are strange skips and gaps which anyone trying to describe manners and customs would certainly not have left. Yet the characters have an inner coherence, if not always a coherence to their social framework. Their fictional qualities lean away from typical social patterns, toward mystery and the unexpected. It is this kind of realism that I want to consider.”

—Flannery O’Connor,
“Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction” (1960)

“[Jesmyn’s] Ward’s award-winning novels are among a number of works, literary and otherwise, that rework Gothic traditions for the 21st century...Ward engages specifically the Southern Gothic tradition. In American literature, there is a long tradition of using Gothic tropes to reveal how ideologies of American exceptionalism rely on repressing the nation’s history of slavery, racism, and patriarchy.”

— Sheri Harrison,
“The New Black Gothic,” *Los Angeles Review of Books* (2018)

In light of both Harrison’s and O’Connor’s comments, construct an essay in which you examine how the books on your list, as well as your own self-described “Appalachian Gothic horror” novel, use aspects of the Southern Gothic tradition to grapple with stereotypes in the assumptions and depictions of the people, culture, or region of the American South. How have these writers (and you, as well) used the Southern Gothic to write what couldn’t be done using more traditional realism? Discuss also how these novels, and yours, have considered the role of gender, class, or race in their fiction, aiming to give voice to what has been historically repressed.

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“I write about Black Southerners, about our speech and our lives, because we are my people—and our voices deserve to be on the page in all their richness and range.”

—Jesmyn Ward

“Dialect is the most intimate form of speech—it reveals where we come from, who we claim, and who claims us.”

—Zora Neale Hurston

“The problem is not that readers can’t understand Black English; it’s that they often don’t think they should have to.”

—Toni Morrison

Writers use dialect and regional vernacular not only as tools of authenticity, but as acts of reclamation. The use of dialect in a voice can anchor a story in place and culture, reveal class and intimacy, or expose the hierarchies embedded in language itself. Yet it also raises difficult questions of legibility, ethics, and representation: who gets to write in which voices, and for whom?

Considering these ideas, construct an essay in which you examine how the writers on your list—along with your own fiction—engage with dialect in shaping voice. How is dialect being represented through sound, syntax, and/or rhythm? What does dialect reveal (consider character, setting, class, and/or social capital) that standard English might obscure? What ethical or aesthetic considerations arise when translating spoken language to the page?

Discuss how at least two novels from your own reading list and two from the MFA program’s suggested list use dialect to explore larger questions of identity, community, and belonging. Consider also how dialect functions not only as a stylistic choice but as a political and cultural one—one that both reflects and resists dominant narratives of language and authority. Lastly, discuss how these writers’ approaches have shaped the way you render voice in your own fiction.

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