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**II*. What is the General Examination?***

The first part of the Comprehensive Exam is called the **General Examination**. *All students*, whether on the thesis or non-thesis track, must take the General Exam. It is only offered three times per year:

* the first Saturday in October
* the first Saturday in February
* the first Saturday in June

Plan in advance when you will take the exam because these are absolutely the only dates on which you can take the exam. It is a good idea not to wait to until your last semester of graduate study to take the exam, in case an emergency prevents you from taking the exam in your final semester, or you fail one or both parts and have to retake the exam. If you don’t feel comfortable taking the exam before your final semester, though, it’s okay to put it off.

**Guidelines for the M.A. in Literature**

**Comprehensive Examination**

**I*. What is the Comprehensive Exam?***

The Comprehensive Exam is a **two-part exam** that every M.A. in Literature student is required to take in order to graduate. It is not comprehensive in the sense that you will have to know everything from *Beowulf* to contemporary literature; it is called the Comprehensive Examination because its two component Exams are the only Exams, outside of classes, you will take.

The first part of the Comprehensive Exam is the General Examination, and the second part varies depending on whether you are on the thesis or non-thesis track. For thesis-track students, the second part of the Comprehensive Exam is the Oral Thesis Defense. For non-thesis-track students, the second part is the Area Examination.

Comprehensive Exam for **Thesis Track** Students:

1. General Examination

2. Oral Defense

Comprehensive Exam for **Non-Thesis Track** Students:

1. General Examination

2. Area Examination

For information about the Oral Defense and the Area Examination, please see, respectively, the booklets “Thesis Guidelines for M.A. in Literature Students” and “Non-Thesis-Track Guidelines for M.A. in Literature Students” in FH 361 or:

**malit.english.txstate.edu/forms/Booklets**

Students must pass **both** parts of the Comprehensive Examination before they can graduate.

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**V. *What problems cause essays to fail?***

**The Analysis essay:** Some students, feeling more familiar and comfortable with interpretation than with analysis, spend their time interpreting at the expense of analysis. Don’t.

**The Synthesis essay:** Budget your time wisely. Some students don’t leave themselves enough time to discuss as many works as the question requires.

**Both essays:** Leave yourself ample time for thorough proofreading and editing. Readers will not pass poorly written essays, risking giving graduate degrees in English to students who can’t write reliably.

**IV. *How can I best prepare myself for the General Exam?***

The General Exam is not meant to be a test for which you need to do a lot of cramming. Rather, its purpose is to test the skills and knowledge you have developed and acquired through your coursework as a graduate student of literature.

There are, however, some general things you can do to help yourself prepare:

1. You should carefully read over the sample examination and sample passing essays in this booklet to get a clearer idea of what the exam is like.
2. Review the analytical vocabulary in Section III above to help you with the Analysis section.
3. For the Synthesis essay, make a mental list of several rich works (such as *The Canterbury Tales*, *Hamlet*, *Huckleberry Finn*, or Joyce’s *Ulysses*) that you know well and from which you can draw examples to support your argument. Make sure your list includes works from different genres and historical periods.

**III*. What is the format of the General Examination?***

The General Exam is divided into two parts: **Analysis** and **Synthesis**. You will have two hours to complete each of the two parts with a one-hour break in between. For each section, you will be required to write an essay.

* **Analysis**- You will be given three short texts or excerpts (including at least one passage of poetry and one of prose). After selecting one of the texts, you will analyze it using the close-reading skills you have acquired as a literature student. You will probably want to consider several of the following, or similar, characteristics: genre, form, style, vocabulary, usage, syntax, rhetoric, figurative language, orthography, tone, and purpose.
* **Synthesis**- You will be given three broad literary questions and asked to respond to one of them in a thoughtful, coherent essay. The questions will require you to draw on your knowledge of several specific literary works that encompass a range of genres and historical periods.

Your Synthesis essay should also reflect some theorizing on the issue. This does not mean that you should take lots of time or space discussing a body of theory for its own sake with little reference to the question. You also need not necessarily apply one kind of theory to the question. We mean, rather, that you should not limit your discussion to concrete observations alone, while leaving unexamined the assumptions underlying your argument.

**VI. *How do I sign up for the General Exam?***

Two weeks before the scheduled exam date, you will receive an email from the program assistant with information and a reminder to sign-up. You may contact the office with questions at any time: FH 361, 512.245.3283, or malit@txstate.edu.

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**VIII. *After I have completed and passed both parts of the Comprehensive Examination required for my track (Thesis or Non-Thesis), is there anything else I need to do in order to graduate?***

Yes. You will need to apply for graduation. In the semester in which you plan to graduate, no later than that semester's application deadline, you must apply for graduation. See the instructions at:

**www.gradcollege.txstate.edu/students/deadlines**

**VII. *Where and when does the General Exam take place? Should I bring anything with me?***

The Exam is administered in the ground-floor computer lab of **Flowers Hall (G13) between 10 am and 3 pm** with a one-hour break at noon for lunch. The Department will accommodate students who have diagnosed disabilities that affect performance on written examinations. Students may use the dictionary built into Microsoft Word. No other books or software may be used. You can’t go onto the Internet. You are permitted to leave the room to use the restroom. A lab technician will be present to answer general computer and procedure questions.

Bring only the following:

1. **Texas State student ID.** You will use your ID# to identify yourself on your essays rather than your name.
2. You may choose to bring a pencil or pen and paper for brainstorming before you begin to write.
3. You may bring a water bottle to prevent dehydration, as long as you keep it at the front of the room.

**Do not** delete your essays from the computer until you have seen that they have been successfully printed. If you want a copy of your essays for yourself, you may print an extra.

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1.

Quoyle, stuck in bedraggled Mockingburg. A place in its third death. Stumbled in two hundred years from forests and woodland tribes, to farms, to a working-class city of machine tool and tire factories. A long recession emptied the downtown, killed the malls. Factories for sale. Slum streets, youths with guns in their pockets, political word-rattle of some litany, sore mouths and broken ideas. Who knew where the people went? Probably California.

Quoyle bought groceries at the A&B Grocery; got his gas at the D&G Convenience; took the car to the R&R Garage when it needed gas or new belts. He wrote his pieces, lived in his rented trailer watching television. Sometimes he dreamed of love. Why not? A free country. When Ed Punch fired him, he went on binges of cherry ice cream, canned ravioli.

He abstracted his life from the times. He believed he was a newspaper reporter, yet read no paper except *The Mockingburg Record,* and so managed to ignore terrorism, climatological change, collapsing governments, chemical spills, plagues, recession and failing banks, floating debris, the disintegrating ozone layer. Volcanoes, earthquakes and hurricanes, religious frauds, defective vehicles and scientific charlatans, mass murderers and serial killers, tidal waves of cancer, AIDS, deforestation and exploding aircraft were as remote to him as braid catches, canions and rosette-embroidered garters. Scientific journals spewed reports of mutant viruses, of machines pumping life through the near-dead, of the discovery that the galaxies were streaming apocalyptically toward an invisible Great Attractor like flies into a vacuum cleaner nozzle. That was the stuff of others' lives. He was waiting for his to begin.

He got in the habit of walking around the trailer and asking aloud, "Who knows?" He said, "Who knows?" For no one knew. He meant, anything could happen.

A spinning coin, still balanced on its rim, may fall in either direction.

**Part I. Analysis (120 minutes)**

Choose one of the three attached passages, and write a detailed, organized, and well-supported analysis that considers some of the following areas: the apparent genre and form; conventions of thought and usage; the formal characteristics of the particular piece in relation to conventions; syntactic, rhetorical and stylistic features; literary features such as figurative language and verbal figures; the kind and effects of vocabulary; the character of the language; significant orthographical features, if any; the idea, tone, seeming purpose of the whole. Do not interpret or evaluate; your job is to analyze.

It is not necessary to name the work or its author; it is not assumed that you have read the passage previously. If you are sure of the author and title, however, indicate them. If you are not certain but think that you can narrow the range of authorship and period, cite the reasons that lead you to make that choice.

**Appendix: Sample General Exam with passing essays**

**Texas State University**

**M.A. in Literature General Examination**

**Spring 2007**

Do not use any books or notes, and do not go onto the Internet. You may use Microsoft Word’s built-in spelling checker/dictionary and/or the dictionary in this room. When writing both essays, **save frequently** and **do not delete the essay until you have actually seen the printout**. When writing both the analysis and the synthesis essays, allow enough time to revise for clear and correct English.

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3.

Mr and Mrs Veneering were bran-new people in a bran-new house in a bran-new quarter of London. Everything about the Veneerings was spick and span new. All their furniture was new, all their friends were new, all their servants were new, their plate was new, their carriage was new, their harness was new, their horses were new, their pictures were new, they themselves were new, they were as newly married as was lawfully compatible with their having a bran-new baby, and if they had set up a great-grandfather, he would have come home in matting from the Pantechnicon [a London furniture warehouse], without a scratch upon him, French polished to the crown of his head.

For, in the Veneering establishment, from the hall-chairs with the new coat of arms, to the grand pianoforte with the new action, and upstairs again to the new fire-escape, all things were in a state of high varnish and polish. And what was observable in the furniture, was observable in the Veneerings—the surface smelt a little too much of the workshop and was a trifle sticky.

There was an innocent piece of dinner-furniture that went upon easy castors and was kept over a livery stable-yard in Duke Street, Saint James's, when not in use, to whom the Veneerings were a source of blind confusion. The name of this article was Twemlow. Being first cousin to Lord Snigsworth, he was in frequent requisition, and at many houses might be said to represent the dining-table in its normal state. Mr and Mrs Veneering, for example, arranging a dinner, habitually started with Twemlow, and then put leaves in him, or added guests to him. Sometimes, the table consisted of Twemlow and half a dozen leaves; sometimes, of Twemlow and a dozen leaves; sometimes, Twemlow was pulled out to his utmost extent of twenty leaves. Mr and Mrs Veneering on occasions of ceremony faced each other in the centre of the board, and thus the parallel still held; for, it always happened that the more Twemlow was pulled out, the further he found himself from the center, and nearer to the sideboard at one end of the room, or the window-curtains at the other.

2.

To the Fair Clarinda, Who Made Love to Me,

Imagin'd More than Woman

Fair lovely Maid, or if that Title be

Too weak, too Feminine for Nobler thee,

Permit a Name that more Approaches Truth:

And let me call thee, Lovely Charming Youth.

This last will justifie my soft complaint,

While that may serve to lessen my constraint;

And without Blushes I the Youth persue,

When so much beauteous Woman is in view,

Against thy Charmes we struggle but in vain

With thy deluding Form thou giv'st pain,

While the bright Nymph betrays us to the Swain.

In pity to our Sex sure thou wer't sent,

That we might Love and yet be Innocent:

For sure no crime with thee we can commit;

Or if we should--thy Form excuses it.

For who that gathers fairest Flowers believes

A Snake lies hid beneath the Fragrant Leaves.

Though beauteous Wonder of a different kind,

Soft Cloris with the dear Alexis join'd;

When e'er the Manly part of thee would plead

Though tempts us with the Image of the Maid,

While we the noblest Passions do extend

 The Love to Hermes, Aphrodite the Friend.

as having a complex range of personal characteristics, but are simply described as “new.” The author does not spare the use of the word “new” after the first sentence, but continues by repeating the term an additional 11 times throughout the remainder of the paragraph. Again, this repeated use of the word “new” creates the impression that the Veneering’s life lacks complexity.

The insistent newness of their lives also points to a naivety that should cause the reader to doubt their ability to survive in a city with as rich and varied a history as London. For example, the narrator states that “all [the Veneering’s] friends are new,” which is not necessarily a desirable aspect of friendship. New friends are untested friends who may prove to be fickle, unreliable, and harmful in the future. Old friends are people that one can typically rely on for support as time passes. The same can be said for the Veneering’s “great-grandfather,” who – if the Veneerings were interested in such an old thing, which they are apparently not – “would have come home in matting from the Pantechnicon [a London furniture warehouse], without a scratch upon him, French polished to the crown of his head.” One of the principle values of grandparents is the amount of wisdom that they have accumulated through a long life of bumps and scratches. Typically, young people learn important lessons from the elderly because the elderly have experienced trials from which they have learned important lessons themselves. However, the narrator is careful to point out that if the Veneerings wanted an elderly influence in their lives, they would have ordered a “new” elderly influence whose life was free of experiences that could have scratched or bruised him. In addition to stressing the newness of so many important aspects of the Veneering’s life, the narrator endows them with a highly suggestive name – the root of which is “veneer,” meaning varnished or polished. Not only are the circumstances surrounding the central characters new and varnished, but their name – the title whose explicit purpose is to identify its owner – reflects the physical nature of their lives. Although some names may reflect their owner’s occupation

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**Sample essay: Analysis**

3. The narrator of this passage observes the characters and actions from a distance, refusing to comment on the inner lives of the principle characters. The narrator chooses instead to create an impression in the reader’s mind by examining the character’s outward appearances and behaviors. The narrator is clearly familiar with the Veneerings, but it is unclear what the narrator’s relationship to the characters is. Although there is a small chance that the narrator is a friend or relative of the central characters, the narrator’s use of the titles “Mr” and “Mrs” when describing the Veneerings suggests that they are simple acquaintances, or that the narrator does not know them personally at all, but is familiar with them through reputation alone. The narrator does not tell the reader anything about herself/himself, but we are able to gather some clues from the language used in the passage as to the narrator’s personality and purpose. For example, the narrator slips into colloquial pronunciation of some words (“bran-new” rather than the proper brand-new; the cliched “spick and span”; and. . .), which suggests that she/he may be a part of a different social class than those like the Veneerings who live in “a bran-new quarter of London.” Perhaps the narrator is someone from an older quarter of the city, or someone of a lower class who works in the new quarter (a public servant, a maid, the milk man, etc.).

The narrator immediately characterizes the Veneerings as being “new” people. This is characterization is made clear by the sheer number of times that the word “new” is used in the selection’s first paragraph. In fact, within the first sentence, the author uses the word “new” three times without any punctuation to break the sentence’s flow: “Mr and Mrs Veneering were bran-new people in a bran-new house in a bran new quarter of London.” The effect of this rapid repitition of a single word is that the reader feels bombarded with newness. This repetition also limits the scope of the Veneering’s character in the reader’s mind. They are not described

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**Part II. Synthesis (120 minutes)**

Choose one of the following topics, and compose an organized, coherent discussion in response to it. Your essay should demonstrate detailed familiarity with the works selected; you may, if you wish, make brief reference to other works as appropriate. Responses should demonstrate learning as well as an ability to think and write clearly.

Responses should also reflect some theorizing on the issue. This does not mean that you should spend time discussing a body of theory for its own sake with little reference to the question. You also need not necessarily apply one body of theory to the question. We simply mean that you should not limit your discussion to concrete observations alone, while leaving unexamined the assumptions underlying your argument.

history at all (they are described as having a “new coat of arms). Tremlow is confused by the Veneering’s habit of adding excessive leaves to his length, thus removing him further and further away from his original state, much as layers of varnish remove an objects true color and texture from sight. In fact, Tremlow seems to be the most human element of the story, and his humanity exaggerates the Veneering’s lack of humanity in a comic, yet unsettling way. The fact that the narrator comment on the furniture’s thoughts instead of those of the central characters further suggests that the Veneerings lack a complex inner life.

By repeatedly using a single term to describe the central characters, giving them a suggestive name, and personifying an inanimate object, the narrator manages to highlight the lack of dimension in the story’s central characters.

1. Adultery, real or imagined, courses through literary works as it does through the lives of real human beings. Select three works from at least two different cultures or periods (including more than one genre), and discuss the treatment and significance of the adultery in these works.

2. Readers, especially in the West, are sometimes tempted to think of literature as separate and exempt from the serious, life-and-death forces that fill our “real” world. The Salman Rushdie affair opened the eyes of many to the naïveté of that view. Taking examples just from the past two weeks, Orhan Pamuk, the Turkish novelist who won this year’s Nobel Prize in Literature, received a public death threat, and a number of poems which were to be printed in an anthology of poetry by Guantánamo detainees have been classified because, according to a recent Pentagon memo, poetry “presents a special risk” due to its “content and format.” Using at least three examples from at least two periods, discuss the nature of literature’s involvement in the world of harsh or dangerous reality. Don’t discuss the cases in this question, and don’t discuss works which merely portray political issues. Rather, focus on writing which is, in some way, actually involved, as, for example, Rushdie’s novel was.

3. Among the many cultural influences potentially affecting an author's work are the theories of human psychology current at the time the author is writing. Perceptions about how the mind "normally" works—and about the causes and symptoms of common abnormalities—may be particularly important in shaping plot, characterization, and style. Drawing upon four works from at

least three different literary periods or cultures and at least two genres, write an essay that discusses the ways in which these works make use of contemporaneous ideas about psychology.

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**Sample essay: Synthesis**

2. Although the West has traditionally viewed literature as simple art or entertainment that has little practical value in the “real affairs” of the world, there has been a rich tradition of books that have not only commented on the social environments from which they emerge, but have actually involved themselves in distinguishing and attempting to alter their contemporary social circumstances. This is especially true in America, where there is a disturbing history of racism, sexism, homophobia, and persecution of those who refuse to adhere to the moral standards established by America’s Puritan founders. This stifling, Puritanical cultural base has acted as a springboard from which some American authors have helped launch dangerous cultural revolutions that have led to a greater acceptance of diverse people and lifestyles.

At the height of America’s political division over slavery, a division that would ultimately lead to a horrific civil war, Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote and published the controversial novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Not only did this book comment on the state of American culture at the time of its publication, but it actively took a dangerous political stance against the popular institution of slavery. From the South’s point of view, Beecher Stowe’s characterization of the slave trade, forced manual labor, and the Runaway Slave Act (an inhumane piece of legislation that insisted slaves caught in the North be returned to their owners in the South) was seen as a hostile attempt to incite further cultural divisions in an already fragile country poised to violently divide. Despite this tumultuous political landscape, Beecher Stowe – a woman standing on her convictions in a male-dominated society – wrote one of the most influential political novels of her age. In fact, when commenting on the impact that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* had on the events leading up to the American Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln referred to Beecher Stowe as “the little lady who started this big war.”

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*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, in part, portrays the events leading up

to Tom’s death. Tom is an old slave who is sold by his master in order to secure economic stability. Unlike Tom’s original “master,” who is portrayed as being a kind and God-fearing man forced to divide Tom’s family due to circumstances outside of his control (although Beecher-Stowe embeds a certain measure of criticism toward his actions despite his kind exterior), the individual who purchases Tom is cruel and unforgiving. Tom is beaten and ridiculed by both his new master and his fellow slaves, but he refuses to rebel against his owner. In fact, when given the opportunity to escape, Tom refuses on moral grounds.

Eventually, Tom’s longsuffering leads to further persecution and, ultimately, his death. By infusing Tom’s character with gentleness, morality, and a strong love for his fellow man (including his viscous master), Beecher Stowe was able to demonstrate the cruelty of American slavery to a population enraptured by the debate over the States’ rights to sanction and institutionalize slavery. As a result of the publication of Beecher Stowe’s work, a conscientious segment of the population was outraged by the cruelty depicted in the novel, and there was a rapid escalation of tension between the proponents and opponents of slavery in the United States. This escalation would ultimately lead to full scale war, the death of tens of thousands of Americans, and the ultimate abolition of slavery.

Despite the abolition of slavery in the United States, America maintained a tradition of discrimination against African-Americans and those who associated with them. For example, white Americans who enter romantic relationships with black Americans have often been the victims of oppression and violence. In his novel, *The Subterraneans*, Jack Kerouac depicts an inter-racial relationship between a white man and a black woman. Like all of his work, Kerouac’s *The Subterraneans* is based on his actual experiences with real people. Therefore, *The Subterraneans* does not merely portray imagined events that may provoke outrage against a particular piece

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Burroughs embraced the forbidden aspects of society to a far greater extent than Kerouac. For example, in *The Subterraneans*, the narrator smokes marijuana and drinks large quantities of alcohol, but the narrator in *Junky* uses a wide variety of hard drugs – most notably, heroin. In fact, Burroughs’ fixation on heroin provides the novel with its main thematic element – the physical, sexual, and societal effects of heroin use on the one using the drug. The narrator suffers the physical torture of heroin withdraw, the impotence and constipation that accompanies long term use of the substance, and the constant fear of arrest and imprisonment that follows being found in possession of the drug by the police. *Junky*’s narrator is, in fact, arrested and imprisoned as a result of being found in possession of heroin and is frequently sent to psychiatric hospitals where he is subjected to strange, experimental techniques that are designed to cure him of drug addiction.

However, drugs are not the only forbidden aspect of life that Burroughs explores in *Junky*. Like Kerouac in *The Subterraneans*, Burroughs explores homosexuality in his work. There is, however, a clear difference between Kerouac and Burroughs when it comes to homosexuality: Kerouac often implies homosexuality whereas Burroughs openly and exlicitly describes homosexual contact in *Junky*. Although the narrator is married to a woman, he actively engages in homosexual sex with young men that he meets throughout the city. There is *no* attempt to hide his sexual desire for men. At the time that this novel was written, homosexuality was considered a mental disease that could be cured by experimental procedures performed in state-run psychiatric facilities. These procedures included electro-shock therapy and lobotomy. Burroughs was aware that his literary confessions of homosexuality could ultimately lead to his being lobotomized, but he bravely insisted on facing his oppression in order to create a literary work that reflected the reality that he experienced on a daily basis. At this time in American history, homosexuality was a dangerous subject for work that reflected the reality that he experienced on a daily basis.

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of art, but they portray a lived experience (a fusion of life and art) that proved both dangerous and difficult for its author.

*The Subterraneans* is narrated by Leo (Kerouac), a 1950s hipster living in San Francisco. In a haze of drugs and alcohol, Leo develops a romantic relationship with a mentally unstable African-American woman. The novel follows the narrator as he falls in and out of love with this woman, frequents jazz clubs, uses drugs, drinks alcohol throughout the day and night, wanders randomly through the streets, and has homosexual encounters with men who he admires. The social climate of 1950’s America was not accepting of inter-racial sex, drug use, vagrancy, and homosexuality. This climate was, in part, produced by the existing power structures of the day: the police enforced white Americans’ “right” to discriminate against people of color, young men could be arrested for loitering on the streets with nothing to do, and homosexuality was considered a mental illness which required institutional care. In fact, the narrator often exhibits attitudes that reflect this culturally engrained racism and homophobia. For example, the narrator implies homosexual encounters rather than describing them in explicit terms, and he often speaks of his African-American lover in degrading, racist terms. However, despite the inner tension that he feels over his choice of lovers, Leo does not refrain from having sexual intercourse with men and his African-American lover. By freely associating himself with these forbidden aspects of life, Kerouac openly accepted the possibility that he would be disowned by his family (he hides his relationship from his mother and sister), harmed by the general public, or interred by the oppressive power structure 1950s American authority.

A contemporary of Kerouac, William Burroughs, also published books that dealt with race, drugs, vagrancy, and homosexuality. For example, in his novel, *Junky*, Burroughs tells an autobiographical tale that has much in common with Kerouac’s *The Subterraneans*. Like Kerouac, Burroughs relied on his actual lived experiences to determine the actions portrayed in *Junky*, but

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At this time in American history, homosexuality was a dangerous subject for any author to write about, but it was especially dangerous for an author like Burroughs who had a history of spending time in prison and psychiatric wards.

Beecher Stowe, Kerouac, and Burroughs all courageously involved their literature in the social makeup of their day. While Beecher Stowe’s novel was clearly political and moral in nature, Kerouac and Burroughs were openly exploring the “dark” side of American culture with a boldness that remains surprising today. All of these authors were placing themselves and others at risk by publishing their novels. Works that are “safe” (novels and poems that celebrate the status quo or the stable aspects of society) are often beloved by the public because they reaffirm the public’s existing beliefs. “Dangerous” work (novels and poems that reject popular sentiment in favor of a less celebrated position or lifestyle), however, often incites the retribution of those who fear the change proposed in the “dangerous” work. But these “dangerous” works refuse to simply observe things as they are meant to be seen. Instead, they tilt and twist the status quo until it appears obsolete and ridiculous. They immerse themselves in the many contradictions inherent in social injustices like institutionalized racism and homophobia in order to destroy them from within. By refusing to accept the established cultural norms, they manage to destroy them and create new cultures in their place. All of the authors cited above succeeded in this tilting and twisting by involving their work in dangerous and intimidating cultural revolutions, and through their involvement, they managed to free countless people from further persecution and oppression.