

Engl 68B, Fall 2015

Essay topics for the final exam

The first half of your final exam will look very much like the midterm, except that it will cover authors and works assigned since then (beginning with Edward Arlington Robinson). The second half will consist of a single essay on one of the following topics, dealing with Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, and August Wilson's *Fences*. Which topic you will be asked to write on will be revealed to you at the final.

A. All three plays, Williams' *Streetcar*, Miller's *Salesman*, and Wilson's *Fences*, deal on some level with emotional collapse, cognitive disability, or mental illness. Blanche, Willie, and Gabriel all suffer episodes of delusion or confusion, but they are only the most obvious cases in entire casts of characters living on the edge of sanity. Discuss each play as a psychological drama, and what that has to say about modern American life.

B. Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, and August Wilson's *Fences* all make use of an almost static location as their setting: the Elysian Fields street scene and the flats that look out on it; the Lomans' house and yard; and the Maxsons' yard. Only Miller takes us anywhere else, and that's briefly. Otherwise, all three plays fulfill the Greek notion of a unity of place. And yet a sense of place operates differently in each play. In *Streetcar*, Belle Reve overshadows Elysian Fields. In *Salesman*, the Lomans' house, once almost in the countryside, is now overshadowed by surrounding apartment buildings. Only in *Fences*, however, is the setting interactive, with changes to the Maxsons' yard as the play goes along representing changes in the lives of the characters. Discuss the importance of setting in all three, and how it affects the plot and themes of each play.

C. Sports and games are important in all three plays, from bowling and poker in *Streetcar*, to football and gin-rummy in *Salesman*, to football and baseball in *Fences*. Discuss how sports and games are used in each play, whether they have any figurative or psychological import or any effect on the outcome of that play, and why they have such prominence in these three plays in particular.

**The final is on Thursday, December 10, 12:15-2:30. Be sure to bring one or two full-sized exam booklets.**