Literature

Sample questions and justifications

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Justifications of Comprehensive Exam Questions

For my comprehensive exam, I chose to focus on vegan studies in literature. I came to WCU’s MA program primarily to pursue vegan studies with the field’s founder, Dr. Laura Wright. As an undergraduate, I had taken time off from school, partly because I had trouble deciding on a major. During this time, I became vegan and thought to myself, “I wish I could major in veganism” because of all the complicated ethical questions this practice involves. Then I found Dr. Wright’s book, *The Vegan Studies Project: Food, Animals, and Gender in the Age of Terror*, at a vegan festival in Asheville and thought, “Maybe I *can* study veganism!” I went back to college as a women’s and gender studies major because ecofeminism seemed like the field most closely related to vegan studies. Since I have come to WCU for graduate school, I have expanded my understanding of vegan studies, especially as it applies to literature. If I decide to continue in academia, I will want vegan studies (as well as its related field, animal studies) to be my specialization.

Vegan studies is a field of critical theory and cultural studies which examines representations of veganism, meat-eating, and non-human animals in literature and popular culture. Wright coined the term with the publication of *The Vegan Studies Project*. My reading list incorporates foundational works of vegan studies in literature, such as *Frankenstein* and *The Jungle*, as well as theory, like *The Sexual Politics of Meat* and *Animal Liberation*. The list also contains a wide variety of genres, such as novels, poetry, nonfiction, film, and one play. Themes these works have in common include eating disorders, cannibalism, and intersections between the oppressions of non-human animals and other subjugated peoples. I have composed these questions based on those themes and others.

**1. In “A Vegan Rhetorical Approach to Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*,” Ryan Phillips explains that the novel did not inspire its readers to pursue vegetarianism or animal rights activism. Nevertheless, many of the works of literature on the reading list allude to *The Jungle* as one of the first depictions of the industrial slaughterhouse. In comparison to Sinclair’s novel, how do one or more contemporary representations of the slaughterhouse link the killing of human and non-human animals?**

Upton Sinclair famously declared about *The Jungle*, “I aimed at the public’s heart, and by accident I hit it in the stomach” (3). That is, his goal was to raise awareness of the plight of immigrant workers in Chicago’s meatpacking industry, but readers focused on the unsanitary conditions of the slaughterhouses he depicted and their impact on the quality of the meat produced. *The Jungle* plays a key role in the history of representations of the slaughterhouse, as poets Gabriel Gudding and Selima Hill reference it in their collections, and in her infamous comparison of animal agriculture to the Holocaust, J. M. Coetzee’s character of Elizabeth Costello asserts, “[I]t was from the Chicago stockyards that the Nazis learned how to process bodies” (Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals* 52). One new phenomenon in contemporary representations of the slaughterhouse is the portrayal of dystopian futuristic societies in which humans kill other humans for food. In novels like Don LePan’s *Animals* and Augustina Bazterrica’s *Tender is the Flesh*, humans have resorted to eating each other because pandemics have wiped out other species or made them poisonous to consume. The humans who are slaughtered are often oppressed peoples like disabled people and undocumented immigrants. Michael Faber takes this phenomenon a step further by having aliens kill humans for food in his novel *Under the Skin*. The aliens actually consider themselves to be human and dub the beings we would call humans “vodsels.” In fact, the question of who is considered human is crucial to these contemporary representations of the slaughterhouse. In this way, they evoke Syl and Aph Ko’s theories about the definition of the human-animal binary along racial lines and white supremacy as a form of cannibalism.

**2. In *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*, Carol J. Adams describes “a cycle of objectification, fragmentation, and consumption, which links butchering and sexual violence in our culture” (27). She also documents the practice of feminized protein consumption (in the production of milk from cows and eggs from chickens) and the cultural associations between masculinity and meat-eating. How do masculinity and meat-eating contribute to the oppressions of human women and non-human animals in two or more of the selected works of literature?**

As Laura Wright explains, “*The Vegan Studies Project* in many ways follows Carol J. Adams’s foundational work in *The Sexual Politics of Meat*” (*Vegan Studies Project* 18). In her book, Adams analyzes many works of literature to illustrate her theory that the oppression of human women and the oppression of non-human animals are connected. For instance, she examines the protagonist’s sexual subjugation and identification with the victims of hunting and animal agriculture in Margaret Atwood’s *The Edible Woman*. Ruth Ozeki’s novel *My Year of Meats* is one of the primary sources on the list that exemplifies the sexual politics of meat. In it, the two female protagonists, Jane and Akiko, must negotiate their relationships with meat-eating. Jane is the producer of *My American Wife!*, a Japanese television show that promotes meat-eating by featuring US housewives cooking meat. While she makes the show, Jane discovers little-known facts about the animal agriculture industry, including its use of a hormone called DES that was also used by pregnant women like her mother and has thereby affected her fertility. Akiko is married to an executive of the meat-exporting business that sponsors the TV show. Her husband, an avid meat-eater, abuses her because of her inability to conceive and her not serving him the meats that he likes best. Adams discusses the connections between men’s abuse of women, including for not serving them meat, and their abuse of non-human animals. The concept of the absent referent is central to Adams’s analysis, and in Ariana Reines’s *The Cow*, non-human animals become the absent referent for human women as their oppressions intersect. On the other hand, in *Tender is the Flesh*, human women become the absent referent for female non-human animals when their bodies are used for breeding and producing milk for other humans to consume. Thus, non-human animals and human women act as absent referents for one another in these works of literature.

**3. In *The Vegan Studies Project*, Laura Wright discusses the ways that vegetarianism and veganism factor “into th[e] larger extant debate about control and ownership of real women’s bodies and the way that, with regard to women, nonnormative diets are rendered as inherently disordered forms of consumption that must be kept in check” (90). In the primary sources on the list, how are women’s dietary choices considered disordered? What are the relationships between veganism and eating disorders in some of these works of literature?**

In several of the primary sources on the reading list, vegetarianism and veganism in women are connected to disordered eating, especially anorexia and bulimia nervosa. For example, in Han Kang’s novel *The Vegetarian*, the title character Yeong-hye is the stay-at-home wife of a man with traditional South Korean values. She begins having violent and bloody dreams and refuses to eat meat and other animal products as result. Her new diet quickly devolves into an eating disorder, and her family commits her to a psychiatric hospital. Similarly, in Atwood’s *The Edible Woman*, the protagonist stops eating meat soon after her engagement to a conservative man and her moment of identification with a steak in a restaurant. However, she gradually stops eating not just meat but other types of food, including plants. In Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*, the deuteragonist Nyasha does not identify as a vegetarian or vegan, but she only purges or refuses the animal product-heavy foods at the missionary school where she lives with her immediate family, not the traditionally plant-based meals at her extended family’s homestead. In this way, she embodies Evan Maina Mwangi’s theory of the “vegan unconscious” in postcolonial literature. In each of these works, veganism is depicted as a form of resistance to a patriarchal culture. However, because of its disordered nature, this resistance is ultimately unsuccessful. Hal Herzog argues that vegetarianism is connected to eating disorders because young women in particular use vegetarianism as a socially acceptable reason to cut categories of food out of their diets. However, Wright shows that the studies that claim to prove these results often do not define the terms “vegan” or “vegetarian” correctly. She states, “I believe these studies continue to proliferate because vegetarianism is represented via the same rhetoric of pathology that is used to describe anorexia and because female vegetarianism constitutes a choice that offers a challenge both to patriarchy and to a dietary norm dependent upon that patriarchy” (Wright, *Vegan Studies Project* 101). In the novels described above, female vegetarianism does both: it is represented as pathology but also challenges patriarchy.

**4. In “‘A Grain of Brain’: Women and Farm Animals in Collections by Ariana Reines and Selima Hill,” Rachael Allen argues that *The Cow* and *A Little Book of Meat* undermine the tradition of poets using non-human animals as symbols. Allen also asserts that “in both collections, it is the concept of sickness that comes to represent to the reader a contemporary and disordered relationship with animals” (156). Based on the selected works of literature, what would an ordered relationship with animals look like, especially in poetry? Is such a relationship even possible?**

Poetry in particular has a long history of using non-human animals as metaphors for human experiences. Carol J. Adams criticizes this tradition with her notion of the absent referent, and the poets on this list challenge humans’ customary relationships with non-human animals. For instance, Robinson Jeffers calls humans’ first slaughter of a non-human animal our “Original Sin” and says, “I would rather // Be a worm in a wild apple than a son of man.” He also fantasizes about being eaten by a vulture. In Jeffers’ view, there is no species hierarchy, and having non-human animals eat humans balances our consumption of them. Vegan poets like Kathryn Kirkpatrick and Nickole Brown have different ways of looking at animals. Throughout *Our Held Animal Breath*, Kirkpatrick acknowledges that humans are animals and empathizes with non-humans: “Is this how an animal feels / on the other side of a human eye?” (22). She similarly questions the ethics of factory farming. Brown prays to talk to animals and praises them as “those beasts who were our first / gods” (18). She also addresses to Mary Oliver a poem about the lack of wild animals in urban environments. Thus, Jeffers’ ideal relationship with non-human animals may not be possible in the present. According to Kirkpatrick’s view through an animal’s eye, humans have already caused the world to be lost: “I saw clearly // all they had done and would do / to make a world we’d be losing fast” (23). Our “original sin” of consuming other animals and destroying the environment has led us and all other animals to this point. However, in another poem, “At the Turkey Farm,” Kirkpatrick suggests that a more natural relationship of hunting would be more ordered: “As fair game in the wooded cove, / … their welcomed spirits would not haunt us” (21). This perspective is somewhat surprising coming from a vegan poet, especially since, in the previous poem in the collection, Kirkpatrick criticizes George Moore’s construction of a shooting preserve in the Smoky Mountains. However, Moore brought in animals like buffalos and Colorado mule deers, who would not normally live in this environment. Again, in Kirkpatrick’s opinion, our ideal relationship with non-human animals seems to be one that is more natural. Thus, even vegan poets have complicated views on animal relationships.

**5. In *Sistah Vegan: Black Female Vegans Speak on Food, Identity, Health, and Society*, A. Breeze Harper “reexamine[s] veganism as an alternative, food ways movement, as well as a personal health choice from a Black feminist, antiracist, and decolonizing perspective” (xxiii). Similarly, in *Aphro-ism: Essays on Pop Culture, Feminism, and Black Veganism from Two Sisters*, Aph and Syl Ko state, “we believe our identification as [B]lack affects what our veganism will look like” (53). Based on these collections of essays, as well as other primary sources on the list, how do literary works by people of color negotiate the intersections of race and veganism?**

Some of the many challenges people of color encounter in becoming vegan include potentially offensive comparisons between the oppressions of POC and those of non-human animals, the perception that veganism is a “white person’s thing,” the class privilege sometimes required to obtain healthy plant-based food, and the lack of representation of POC in animal rights spaces. The contributors to *Sistah Vegan* deal with all of these issues and more. For example, Ain Drew describes her experience as a Black woman working for People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. PETA is known for their comparisons of the oppressions of non-human animals and to those of POC, such as their exhibits juxtaposing images of factory farming and slavery, which have offended many Black people and others. Drew and other authors in *Sistah Vegan* complicate perspectives on these comparisons by discussing some of the parallels between these forms of oppression. Harper and many other writers in the collection also stress understanding western diets as a colonial imposition on people of color, and they promote decolonizing their bodies through the adoption of veganism. *Nervous Conditions* illustrates this kind of colonization of the diet, which Nyasha attempts to resist through disordered eating. The authors of *Sistah Vegan* present more sustainable form of resistance by showing that veganism can be a method of health-based decolonization as well as an ethical choice for the benefit of non-human animals. Aph Ko is the founder of Black Vegans Rock, a website that spotlights Black vegans from around the world, and she discusses the backlash she received when she launched the project. Aph and her sister Syl coin the term “Black veganism” as a way “of being vegan, which suggests that there are lots of equally legitimate ways to understand, articulate, and resist how it is that animals are negatively impacted by our systems of power” (*Aphro-ism* 53). Aph Ko further develops these ideas in *Racism as Zoological Witchcraft: A Guide to Getting Out*. As for other works of literature, in *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye’s South Korean culture comes into conflict with her refusal to eat animal products. Yeong-hye responds by rejecting cultural expectations for her as a woman and as well as a South Korean person. Similarly, in *My Year of Meats*, Akiko and Jane must negotiate their desire not to eat meat and their Japanese and American cultures.