

## Model Timed Essay:

### a 2.5-hour final exam responding to a prompt comparing fiction texts

This is an open-book essay exam. Compose an essay with separated paragraphs: an introduction that contains a thesis (your answer with your opinion to the prompt), body paragraphs with evidence from the text and your own analysis, and a sense of closure at the end. Be sure to answer all parts of the prompt in your response. You will have 75 minutes:

**This semester we have read 4 texts centered on the theme “Activism: Be the Change.” Choose 3 of the 4 texts that you feel the authors wrote with a strong activist intent: one poem, one short story, one play and/or the novel. Who is the audience you think the writer is targeting with this piece and why? What is the writer trying to convince this audience of that they may not have believed or understood before? What do these 3 authors have in common regarding how they are trying to achieve political or social change through fiction and what can we learn from this comparison?**

**This part was not given on the exam—this is helpful advice on breaking down prompts:**

**TO BEGIN:** Before writing the essay, quickly break down the prompt so you stay focused and you can generate a quick outline using the prompt that ensures you will directly respond to what was asked. The rhetoric gives simple steps to do this quickly:

(1) **Read the prompt carefully and several times:** do not “rush in” and start writing as this puts you in danger of writing off topic or missing important parts of the prompt. Take a moment and read the prompt through several times.

(2) **Sum up the topic in a few words:** What is the focus of the prompt? Narrow down the focus of the prompt in a word or two to help you mentally focus as well.

**The targeted audience and why**

(3) **Circle and/or underline the key words:** Circle or underline the command verbs or question words that are telling you do something or asking you about something.

(4) **Identify and count the required steps in the writing task:** this is a crucial step in timed writing. You don't want to overlook any parts of the question and get little to no credit for your work as a result. Number the parts of the prompt you need to address in your essay and oftentimes you can even use this as an informal outline for the essay.

(1) **Choose 3 of the 4 texts that you feel the authors wrote with a strong activist intent: one poem, one short story, one play and/or the novel.**

(2) **Who is the audience you think the writer is targeting with this piece and why?**

(3) **What is the writer trying to convince this audience of that they may not have believed or understood before?**

(4) **What do these 3 authors have in common regarding how they are trying to achieve political or social change through fiction and what can we learn from this comparison?**

## Literature: The vessel for social justice

“Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not”  
--Dr. Seuss, *The Lorax*

Within the written word lies the capability for humanity to understand itself. The history of humankind can be discouraging when examining slavery, imperialism, and religious oppression. But through literature, discoveries are born and empathy learned when activism takes on the role of bringing the voices of those who have been silenced to wider audiences. In the “The Progress of Liberty,” James Madison Bell uses poetry to invite his readers into the reality for African Americans soon after the abolition of slavery. In the play *Tennis in Nablus*, Ismail Khalidi utilizes satire to draw his audience’s attention to the nightmare of British imperialism in Palestine. Then, in the novel *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Azar Nafisi shares with her audience how life dramatically changed in Iran, for women in particular, during the Islamic revolution. Through these three pieces of literature, it becomes clear that writing is a powerful tool for an activist to fight for social justice. The strategy of choosing an audience, honing in on a strong message, then delivering the meaning through an engaging work of literature, can spread through minds like wildfire because change in the world begins with a change in thought.

Without an audience, who will listen? The most important part of building a story is deciding who the words will effect. Bell writes his poem with his African American brothers and sisters in mind to instill hope and change within their battered morale. Bell is trying to awaken is his black readers self-identity and self-value, and encourages them to “let self-respect become your guide: / then will consistency reflect / your rightful claims to manhood’s pride”

(527). Written shortly after the legalized end of slavery, Bell was speaking to those who lived during slavery and some who directly experienced being enslaved, so Bell is convincing his audience that healing lies not in hatred or revenge but in self-love.

Khalidi's play *Tennis in Nablus* draws his readers in with a sense of humor and the ability to take in tragic information through satire. When the British general dresses up as Hitler for a costume ball, the reader begins to understand the message of the play and the ironic similarities between British imperialism and Hitler's rule. As the British lieutenant declares to the general, "you've really captured the gravitas, and all the stern, intense, demented energy of the man. Bravo, tut-tut, well done!" (Khalidi 2171), a simple and outlandish costume takes on a much deeper meaning. As Hitler oppressed the European Jews, the British oppressed the Palestinians. Here Khalidi tries to reach his Jewish audience by making this connection between imperialism and the Holocaust. Although Jewish Israelis and Palestinians have been pitted against one another for decades, this scene asks them to recognize the common ground of oppression and displacement that they share.

In *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Nafisi appeals to her western audience by making the complexities of the Islamic conservatives taking over Iran more digestible and relatable by making parallels to well-known western literature like *The Great Gatsby*, *Lolita* and to authors like Jane Austen and Henry James. Nafisi incorporates these famous novels and authors through the discussions in her clandestine book club where she and some of her former female students take off their head coverings, read and discuss the banned western books, and try to understand the dramatic changes happening around them in their own country. This also

allows Nafisi's Muslim readers to examine the darker aspects of the Islamic revolution with some distance through this literary lens.

All three of these writers provide their audiences powerful messages about how to survive oppression. Bell is rallying his audience and employing his gift of writing to remind them over and over of something they may have not had the opportunity to know personally: self-worth. This asks readers to step away from a victim mentality that would disempower them, and to instead call on a self-respect that will engender the same in others. This is a ground-shaking message to an audience that mere years before were treated as property and objects. Khalidi, although a modern writer, sets his play in the 1930s to show the long duration of suffering the Palestinians have endured. A suffering that continues to present-day as according to the website Al-Awda, "Palestinians are the largest and longest suffering group of refugees in the world. One in three refugees worldwide is Palestinian." And yet, the Palestinians still fight. They continue to fight for their rights, for statehood and a return of their people to their homeland. Nafisi through her story shows how quickly people, particularly women, can lose their freedom. As the religious conservatives took over her country, Nafisi lost her teaching career, her ability to leave the house uncovered and without male escort, and eventually she goes into exile for 17 years. And yet Nafisi does return after exile determined to make Iran again her home. Whether it is finding deep self-value, continuing to educate yourself on the oppression that other cultures or races endure, or spreading your own truth and calling for action, these authors teach us that not only can we survive oppression but also discover that advocacy is a living and breathing strength inside each of us.

Through fiction, these writers show us how to put the wheels of change in motion through empathy. Bell through his poem makes all of his readers feel the devastating mental and psychological effects of slavery that have persisted even after its eradication. Khalidi makes his readers laugh at the lunacy of imperialism and at the same time makes them angry at the hypocrisy of the on-going social injustice of occupation. Nafisi, by showing the reality within fiction and the fiction within reality, helps her readers feel more connected to these women under the veil and to care what their lives are like. These acts of evoking empathy make these writers activists in their own right as they seek political and social change by writing pieces that humanize these marginalized and silenced populations. These works allow for the wider dissemination of struggle to audiences who can be made into allies. The authors show their readers that it is important for us to understand others and that this can be life changing. Azar Nafisi writes, "the biggest sin is to be blind to others' problems and pains. Not seeing them means denying their existence" (132). It is through literature that we are able to truly see others and this can propel us forward to create positive, lasting change. We all have power no matter how powerless or insignificant we think we are. We must step up and own our power to break cycles of oppression when we see them and call for social and political change.