

### **Round One: John Milton v. Allen Ginsberg**

Ginsberg wins the opening tip and starts quickly from there. His unconventionally informal uniform, haranguing taunts, antics during TV timeouts, and freewheeling style of play sets the crowd to howling. He provides the game's only highlights with several early break-away dunks and a tournament-record three halfcourt buckets, equally enabled by skill, luck, and performance-enhancing drugs.

In matchups like this upsets occur when the prohibitive favorite overlooks the underdog-who-got-game. It soon becomes apparent that the favorite is not napping. Ginsberg has fired Milton's moral and aesthetic ire, and catches the brunt of vintage Miltonic preparation: a masterly gameplan, drilled and executed to perfectionist perfection. The game slows to a Latin pace. Milton's inexorable triangle offense of Satan, Sin, and Death know they can afford to be patient. Ginsberg's syntactically improvisational offense gets stifled by seemingly endless, painstakingly controlled subordinate clauses. Samson and Ha-Rapha block a lot of shots.

Once God the Father enters the game early in the second half as a defensive substitution (His first minutes of the season), everyone knows that the outcome is a foregone conclusion. In a low-scoring contest brutal to watch, Milton, still, by 35.

**Winner: John Milton**

### **Round One: *East of Eden* v. *Lord of the Rings***

Somehow, as a male, I made it to my thirties before I read *Lord of the Rings*. It could be that I was not much of a reader during my teenage years, actually playing sports (gasp!) for much of that time. It was not that I was not a geek in my own way, but not enough of one to become a Tolkien fan. I only read the books, in fact, because the movies were coming out, and I had a friend who really wanted to see them. I had read Tolkien's essay on *Beowulf*, and I was thoroughly impressed with it, so I was looking forward to reading his novels.

I also came to *East of Eden* late, just a few years after Tolkien, in fact. I had read *The Grapes of Wrath* in graduate school and thought it was an excellent novel. People kept telling me to read *East of Eden*, but it's a long novel, and I just never found the time. I'm glad I did, though, as I found a novel that explored serious questions through phenomenal prose, both of which stand out even without the connections to the Cain and Abel story.

What I found when I read Tolkien was a good deal of walking and singing, with some fighting thrown in to keep a teenager's attention. I remember thinking, "How are they going to make a movie out of this?" I found out when they cut much of the walking and all of the singing. Perhaps I came to this trilogy too late or perhaps I simply don't know enough of the Tolkien's connections to great literature of the past, but it never affected to me.

*East of Eden* is a book I would love to find the time to read again. I don't even have a desire to watch the movie versions of Tolkien, more or less read the books.

**Winner: *East of Eden***

**Round One: *Moby-Dick* v. *White Teeth***

I have heard wonderful things about *White Teeth*, but I have not yet had a chance to read it. It doesn't matter, though, as it's not *Moby-Dick*. Then again, nothing is, much to their regret.

**Winner: *Moby-Dick***

### **Round One: *Frankenstein* v. *Tom Jones***

There are at least 60 English language film adaptations of *Frankenstein*. There's only one of *Tom Jones*. Granted, the *Frankenstein* adaptations include such dubious efforts as *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* and *Jesse James Meets Frankenstein's Daughter*, and the adaptation of *Tom Jones* did win 4 Academy Awards, but still...60 to 1. That's worth considering.

I think the filmmakers are onto something. The adaptation of *Tom Jones* is a fairly straightforward retelling of the novel; the adaptations of *Frankenstein* veer wildly from the literary to horror-schlocky to bizarrely exploitative (*Frankenhooker*, anyone?) Shelley's book invites a wider variety of critical responses, as we see both from the array of films based on the work and in the work of actual literary critics (surprise! I sneaked in some school stuff!) *Frankenstein* has inspired some terrific critical readings—primarily feminist and psychoanalytic, but also formalist, new historicist, and genre-based readings. Of course, one could also use any of those critical approaches to *Tom Jones*, but he or she wouldn't have as much fun.

So this round goes to Mary Shelley and *Frankenstein*, for inspiring more interesting critical conversations, as well as at least one episode of *Scooby-Doo*. Our friend Tom never did that.

**Winner: *Frankenstein***

### Round One: Robert Frost v. Robert Pinsky

Can the non-Dead White Male poet jump? Can the non-DWM poet hold his own in a tournament game? Pinsky certainly hopes so; he says, “a wisp of harsh air will snake upward from the net when my win-sealer swishes in.” Frost arches an eyebrow, as he is wont do at cheekiness; he says, “If tired of trees I seek again mankind, well I know where to hie me—in the dawn, to the courts of glossy wood.”

Upon hearing of this match-up, I was sure Pinsky was toast. Frost’s *North of Boston* has got to be one of the Top 10n books of poetry in the twentieth-century; he won four Pulitzer Prizes; a done deal, don’t you think?

Not so fast.

What happens if Frost at thirty-nine plays Pinsky at thirty-nine?

P. @ 39 -- associate professor at Wellesley, author of two books of poetry and one book of criticism -- *Sadness and Happiness* (1975), *The Situation of Poetry: Contemporary Poetry and Its Traditions* (1976), *An Explanation of America* (1979)

F. @ 39 – living in England where he can “write and be poor without further scandal;” he rents for himself and his family Little Iddens, a cottage that had been “a shed once used for cattle;” author of one book of poetry -- *A Boy’s Will* (1913)

That’s how P. ekes out the win.

(F. publishes *North of Boston* in 1914 and *Mountain Interval* in 1916, which is to say P. should savor this victory; F. will be a powerhouse once he turns 40)

**Winner: Robert Pinsky**

## Round Two: John Milton v. Ted Hughes

Not a peppy round, this, not a crowd-pleaser. On the one side, Ted Hughes, morose, whose estranged wife Sylvia Plath committed suicide, then whose lover (she whom he left Plath *for*) committed suicide, killing also their young daughter. His is a poetry of monosyllables and tight, tense alliteration. He ruminates on nature, but not so much ruminants: crows and hawks and pikes and jaguars, creatures bound for death or killing or suffering. A good hard work to read, but work. There may be a cheery poem of his, or two; he's written for children. I've not seen it. He wrote a lot before his death in 1998, and was famous for what he wrote—Whitbread Prizes and the British Poet Laureateship. But more famous for those closest to him who died, deaths that cast aspersions that reached him.

On the other side, Milton, in this day and age an acquired taste at best, one of the most difficult tastes to acquire. So long-winded, so *foreign* in his use of language, as if he, like Spenser, wrote not English (as we know it), but something older. You might have to go to graduate school to *love* him, really. And even then . . . but when you love him, you love him, and there's no going back. You put up with the humorlessness, the tireless pedantry, the self-confident pontification from a man who failed at life and politics. You do so for the sake of perfectly controlled syntax and diction, a language wholly bent to the will of its master, the unfurling beauties of etymological polyvalence and periodic sentence, the patient and almost infinite variation of his inexorable blank verse. Then there is "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity," at which the almost empty stands will stand and cheer, for even if Milton (again, like Spenser and his "Epithalamion") didn't know how to laugh, he knew how to rejoice.

**Winner: John Milton**

## Round Two: Eliot (3) v Pinsky (11)

If you're like me – and I know I am – then you run into “those teams” every time you watch competitive sports: teams that you simultaneously dislike and respect. They're good and they know it. And they know you know it. And of course you know it because, when they hit the court, or field, or – in our case – page, you know you are seeing a force of nature – something truly unique.

I'm not a big fan of Eliot. Like many modernists, he too often comes across to me as a bit “too-clever-for-you-unread-and-unwashed-masses.” An elitist. If I was funny, I might try to parlay that observation into some kind of pun like “eliot-ist”. But I am not funny. As you can see.

But I digress . . .

Perhaps the reasons I dislike Eliot are the reasons that I prefer Pinsky. No, the latter's poetry is by no means simple. Its unmistakable power resides in the juxtaposition of the concrete, often everyday images, and deeper, transcendent ideas. He lassos the intimacy of children's dance to his description of national identity. Good stuff, really.

Still, my preferences do not make champions and, as I suggested earlier, I am able to simultaneously express dislike and respect (“I am large. I contain multitudes”). Eliot is a monster. A genius. Heck, he can't be contained in either the Norton Anthology of American Literature or the Norton Anthology of English Literature. *He's in both.*

He's a critic. He's a playwright. He's a poet. And he's quite good at all of it.

And, just like with “those teams,” he's fascinating to watch work. Scary, even. And perhaps, at the end of the day, I'm just scared of T.S.

Plus I really do like “Hollow Men.”

**Winner: Eliot**

### Round Three: Hamlet v. East of Eden

I have been joking (sort of) that I've taken great glee in tossing out the expected winners in a variety of contests, and I have said that I couldn't wait to get my hands on *Hamlet*. Now that I have the opportunity to kick it to the curb, though, I have had a few minutes of pause. After all, this is *Hamlet*, and this is Shakespeare, not some metaphysical poet or 18th-century British novel. The reason we teach *Hamlet* in English 300 is because it lends itself to a wide array of interpretations, as it's complex enough to stand up to all of the critical theories we introduce in that class. A work of literature that versatile and strong deserves serious consideration. It deals with issues of gender and class, as well as questions of purpose and motivation. It raises questions about the nature of drama itself centuries before postmodernism comes along to supposedly invent metadrama. And, of course, the play does all of this with interesting and beautiful language, something I always forget until I am teaching it again, then I read a passage and stop myself to remind the students of how lovely it is.

So how can *East of Eden* go up against all of that? First, if *Hamlet* is Shakespeare's greatest work (though that's far from decided, as many people would put *King Lear* in that role), then *East of Eden* is also Steinbeck's, especially according to Steinbeck himself. He wrote a good deal of forgettable fiction, but all of that helped him produce two of the greatest American works in the 20th Century, much as Shakespeare's forgettable plays (has anyone read *Titus Andronicus* lately?) help him find his greatest works. And this is not a competition between Shakespeare and Steinbeck, as Shakespeare's output of greatness exceeds any other writer I can think of. No, this is a competition between a play that explores the questions mentioned above with a novel that deals with the second oldest story, the sibling rivalry that leads us all to do awful things to those who are closest to us. He echoes that story and makes it stronger by fleshing it out in all its awful truth. I have a tendency to fall back on the universal, and I believe that Steinbeck touches that universal in this novel much more strongly than Shakespeare does in his play. And he can write fairly well, also.

**Winner: *East of Eden***



### Round Three: Milton v Coleridge

This is an interesting matchup between two behemoths of English verse. The argument for **breadth** is right out the window as both poets extended themselves beyond verse, making significant contributions to critical, political, and scholarly writing. The argument for **quality** is also a wash; the disparity between the two is not glaring and so such a question could easily devolve into endless arguments between readers about what one means by “quality.” One could turn to **canonicity** and, in that regard, I suppose the edge would be given to Milton though he has had the advantage of being dead a bit longer and – as we know – death always sweetens one’s position in the canon. Recapping, then:

Canon?

Out.

Breadth?

Out.

Quality?

Out.

So . . . I am going to bring all of my critical acumen to bear and make a decision that carries with it the full force of my twenty three years of schooling and say:

“Heads it’s Milton. Tails it’s Coleridge”

CLOSE ON coin as leaves thumb and turns in the air.

CLOSE ON face of ANONYMOUS ACADEMIC as his/her eyes widen in anticipation.

**Winner: Coleridge**