SE III Speaking exam 2024/2025

**THE USE OF AI or MORAL CENSORSHIP (CANCEL CULTURE AND BOOK BANS )**

For your speaking exam in SE3 you have to work with a classmate. In preparation for the exam the two of you will read two novels and write a paper, in which you compare the two books and answer a number of questions.

* The exam starts with a 7-minute presentation on the books, based on your paper.
* In the remaining 13 minutes you will get questions to answer and statements to discuss, all relating to (the themes of) your books.

**Background information on the Use of AI in literature**

*The use of AI (*Artificial Intelligence) in literature often explores the intersection between technology and humanity, raising profound questions about consciousness, ethics, and the future of human society. In novels like "Klara and the Sun," "Machines Like Me," and "Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?" authors delve into the implications of AI on our lives, portraying robots and androids with human-like qualities that challenge our understanding of what it means to be human.

These stories often highlight the blurred lines between human and machine, touching on themes such as the nature of consciousness and the ethical dilemmas posed by advanced technology. They question whether AI can truly possess emotions and consciousness or if they are mere simulations. Furthermore, these narratives explore the potential societal impact of AI, such as the displacement of human workers, the ethical treatment of sentient (= perceiving and responding to sensations) machines, and the moral responsibilities of creators towards their creations.

Additional themes related to the use of AI in literature:

* Human vs. machine
* Consciousness and sentience
* Ethical dilemmas in technology
* Impact on society and employment
* Creator and creation Relationships
* Technological dependency and control
* Identity and individuality

**The exam**

***Step 1 Choose your novels***

Choose two works of fiction. Choose from:

*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* by Philip K. Dick (1968)

This 1968 novel is set in a post-apocalyptic future where Earth has been devastated by nuclear war. The story follows Rick Deckard, a bounty hunter tasked with "retiring" rogue androids that have escaped to Earth. These androids, known as "replicants," are virtually indistinguishable from humans, raising profound questions about what it means to be human. The novel delves into the ethical and philosophical implications of creating artificial life, exploring themes of empathy, identity, and the human condition. It's a classic in the science fiction genre and provides a deep and engaging narrative for discussion.

*Machines Like Me* by Ian McEwan (2019)

Set in an alternative 1980s London, this novel imagines a world where Alan Turing has made significant advancements in AI. The protagonist, Charlie, purchases Adam, one of the first synthetic humans. As Charlie and his partner Miranda interact with Adam, they face complex moral dilemmas about love, consciousness, and the nature of humanity. This book offers a speculative take on how AI could integrate into everyday life and the ethical implications that arise. It raises questions about the nature of consciousness and the responsibilities of creating intelligent machines.

*Klara and the Sun* by Kazuo Ishiguro (2021)

The novel is narrated by Klara, an Artificial Friend (AF) with advanced observational qualities. Klara is designed to be a companion for children and spends her days in a store, hoping to be chosen by a customer. When she is eventually selected by a girl named Josie, Klara becomes deeply involved in Josie’s life and struggles with her illness. The story explores themes of artificial intelligence, love, and what it means to be human. It provides a nuanced exploration of AI's role in society, particularly in terms of companionship and ethical considerations. It’s rich in character development and philosophical questions, making it excellent for discussion.

***Step 2 Write a compare and contrast essay***

The questions below can serve as a jumping-off point for your overview. Compose a thorough and coherent answer to (some of) the questions below. If a question seems appropriate for your combination of works, elaborate. If a question seems less appropriate, or you have few insights on the matter, do not go into detail as much or skip it altogether. Rephrase the answers into a paragraph or paragraphs, so that they stand on their own.

* Illustrate your answers with **fragments** from the books or **quotes** from the articles.

**General questions:**

1. **Comparison of AI characters:**
   * How do the AI characters in each novel differ in terms of their abilities, personalities, and roles within their respective societies?
   * Which AI character do you find the most sympathetic or relatable, and why?
2. **Human-AI relationships:**
   * How do human characters interact with AI characters in each novel? What do these interactions reveal about human nature and the potential for AI to influence human behavior and emotions?
   * Are the relationships between humans and AI in these novels positive, negative, or a mix of both? Provide examples to support your opinion.
3. **Ethical and moral considerations:**
   * What ethical dilemmas are presented in each novel regarding the creation and use of AI? How do the characters address or struggle with these dilemmas?
   * Do the novels suggest that AI should have rights or be treated as equals to humans? Why or why not?
4. **Impact of AI on society:**
   * How does the presence of AI affect the societies depicted in each novel? Consider both positive and negative impacts.
   * In what ways do the authors use their narratives to comment on real-world issues related to AI and technology?
5. **Concept of humanity:**
   * What do each of the novels suggest about what it means to be human? How do the AI characters challenge or reinforce these ideas?
   * Do you think the AI characters exhibit qualities that make them "human"? Why or why not?

**Specific novel pair questions:**

Klara and the Sun & Machines Like Me:

1. How do Klara's and Adam's creators view their AI creations? How does this influence the way Klara and Adam perceive themselves and their roles in the world?
2. Compare how Klara and Adam form relationships with the human characters. What are the key similarities and differences?

Klara and the Sun & Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?:

1. In what ways do Klara and the androids in "Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?" demonstrate or lack empathy? How is empathy portrayed as a crucial aspect of humanity in both novels?
2. How do the settings of the novels (a near-future society in "Klara and the Sun" versus a post-apocalyptic world in "Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?") influence the depiction and acceptance of AI?

Machines Like Me & Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?:

1. Compare the moral and ethical issues raised in both novels about creating AI that is indistinguishable from humans. How do the characters in each book deal with these issues?
2. Discuss how Adam and the androids in "Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?" struggle with their identities. How do their experiences reflect the broader themes of identity and consciousness?

**Personal reflection questions:**

1. After reading these novels, how has your perception of AI changed? Do you feel more optimistic or pessimistic about the future of AI technology?
2. If you were living in the world of one of these novels, which one would you prefer, and why? How would you interact with AI in that world?
3. Do you think any of the scenarios depicted in these novels could become a reality in the near future? Why or why not?

***Step 3 Prepare your speaking exam***

Your exam starts with a 7-minute presentation, in which you tell us what reading the books and doing the follow-up exercises taught you. You can take turns presenting the insights you have on your particular combination of books. These seven minutes should be jam-packed with your personal analyses, character psychology, description of the setting, the author’s philosophy, and so on. Also, tell us which of the books (each of) you liked best and why. Your teachers have read the books as well, so instead of providing a brief overview of the book, we would appreciate it if the presentation went as in-depth as one can possibly imagine. And remember, quality over quantity. A point well-made is worth so much more than three made half-heartedly.

You will then be asked to discuss a number of statements. The best way to prepare for this is to talk about the books a lot **in English**. Example statements are:

* If androids could think and feel like humans, they should have the same rights.
* Robots are better at decision-making than humans.
* The advantages of AI outweigh the risks.

And, if time allows, you might get some additional questions, such as:

* Did reading these books teach you anything worthwhile?
* Could you relate to the main character? Why (not)?
* Which of the characters in your books did you identify with most?
* Did you like the endings of your books? If you could change one, which would you pick and how would you change it?
* What was the most exciting or interesting fragment in your books?

Or we might ask you to comment on a fragment we’ll show you.

***Assessment***

You will be assessed by your teacher and a colleague. They will focus on fluency, content, pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar.

**Background information cancel culture and book bans**

*Cancel culture* refers to a social phenomenon where individuals or groups are called out, criticized, or boycotted for perceived offensive actions, statements, or beliefs. This often involves public shaming, social media backlash, and sometimes even professional consequences. Cancel culture is driven by concerns for social justice and holding people accountable, but it can also lead to silencing diverse perspectives and stifling open discourse.

The link between cancel culture and book bans lies in their shared impact on free expression. In cancel culture, certain ideas or viewpoints are "canceled" due to being deemed offensive or harmful, potentially leading to the suppression of unpopular or controversial ideas. Similarly, book bans involve restricting access to certain literature based on objections to their content. Both practices can hinder intellectual growth, limit access to diverse viewpoints, and challenge the fundamental principle of free speech. However, the distinction lies in the scale: while cancel culture often focuses on individuals, book bans target entire works, exacerbating concerns about censorship and the free exchange of ideas.

**Additional themes related to cancel culture**

* Social injustice
* Race, sexuality, gender and diversity
* identity politics
* critical race theory
* discrimination
* white privilege
* cultural appropriation

**The exam**

***Step 1 Choose your novels***

Choose two works of fiction. As they are deemed classics of American literature, reading either *The Scarlet Letter* or *To Kill a Mockingbird* is compulsory.

*The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne (1850).

*The Scalet Letter* is a novel set in Puritan New England and follows the story of Hester Prynne, a woman who is forced to wear a scarlet letter "A" on her chest as punishment for committing adultery. The novel explores themes of sin, guilt, redemption, and the consequences of societal judgment.

Hester's public humiliation and the way the community treats her can be seen as early examples of cancel culture, where individuals are socially punished for their perceived transgressions. The novel prompts reflection on the ethics and effectiveness of such punitive practices, paralleling contemporary debates around cancel culture's impact on individuals and society's role in enforcing social norms.

*To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee (1961)

*To Kill a Mockingbird*, a classic of modern American literature, is a Pulitzer Prize-winning novel about a child’s view of race and justice in the Depression-era South. The book sells one million copies per year. Its primary themes are racial injustice and the destruction of innocence, but scholars have noted that Lee also addresses issues of class, courage, compassion, and gender roles in the [Deep South](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deep_South). Lessons from the book emphasize tolerance and decry prejudice.

Despite its themes, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was banned for being ‘immoral literature’ in 1966 and continues to be challenged for its use of racial [epithets](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epithet). It is still one of the most commonly banned books in the United States.

*American Psycho* by Brett Easton Ellis (1991)

*American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis is a novel that delves into the mind of Patrick Bateman, a wealthy and handsome investment banker in Manhattan who leads a double life as a sadistic serial killer. The novel explores his descent into madness, obsession with materialism, and brutal acts of violence. It is a satirical critique of consumerism, social elitism, and the superficiality of 1980s American society.

The book has been subject to controversy due to its graphic violence, explicit sexual content, and disturbing themes. While it hasn't been widely banned, it has faced challenges and restrictions in various locations due to concerns about its content. The banning or attempted banning of "American Psycho" has typically been based on objections to its explicit content, which some deem offensive, morally objectionable, or psychologically distressing.

*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie (2007)

*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is a semi-autobiographical young adult novel, which follows the story of Arnold Spirit Jr., a Native American teenager living on the Spokane Indian Reservation. Frustrated by the limitations of his reservation's school, Arnold transfers to a predominantly white school off the reservation, navigating the challenges of cultural identity, poverty, and personal growth. The novel addresses themes of racism, poverty, friendship, and resilience, while also incorporating humour and honesty.

The book has faced challenges and bans in various school districts due to its depiction of explicit language, sexual content, drug and alcohol use, and themes of violence. Critics argue that these elements make the book unsuitable for younger readers. On the other hand, proponents of the book assert that it offers valuable insights into the experiences of marginalized communities, promotes empathy, and tackles important issues that many teenagers face. They contend that its frank portrayal of difficult topics encourages thoughtful discussion and critical thinking among students. The controversy surrounding the novel highlights the ongoing debate between the need for authentic, unfiltered narratives and concerns over age-appropriate content in educational settings.

***Step 2 Write a compare and contrast essay***

The questions below can serve as a jumping-off point for your overview. Compose a thorough and coherent answer to (some of) the questions below. If a question seems appropriate for your combination of works, elaborate. If a question seems less appropriate, or you have few insights on the matter, do not go into detail as much or skip it altogether. Rephrase the answers into a paragraph or paragraphs, so that they stand on their own.

* Illustrate your answers with **fragments** from the books or **quotes** from the articles.

**General questions:**

1. **Understanding Cancel Culture and Book Bans:**
   * How do you define cancel culture and book bans? What are the similarities and differences between these concepts?
   * Why do you think some books, including the ones you've read, are frequently challenged or banned?
2. **Impact on society:**
   * How do the themes and messages in each novel contribute to the debate around cancel culture and book bans?
   * What impact do you think banning these books has on society, particularly on the younger generation?
3. **Themes and controversies:**
   * What are the specific themes or content in each novel that have led to them being challenged or banned? Do you think these concerns are justified?
   * How do the authors address controversial topics, and what is their purpose in including these themes in their stories?
4. **Freedom of expression:**
   * How do the novels explore the idea of freedom of expression? Do you think the authors intended to provoke thought or challenge societal norms with their works?
   * Should there be any limits to freedom of expression in literature? Why or why not?
5. **Characters and morality:**
   * How do the characters in these novels navigate societal expectations and moral dilemmas? What can their experiences teach us about cancel culture and book bans?

**Specific novel pair questions:**

To Kill a Mockingbird & The Scarlet Letter:

1. How do the protagonists, Scout Finch and Hester Prynne, challenge the societal norms and prejudices of their times? What consequences do they face for their actions?
2. Compare how each novel addresses issues of morality and justice. How are these themes relevant to the discussion of cancel culture and book bans today?

To Kill a Mockingbird & American Psycho:

1. What are the reasons behind the controversies surrounding "To Kill a Mockingbird" and "American Psycho"? Do you believe the criticisms of these books are valid?
2. Discuss the portrayal of violence and morality in both novels. How do the authors use these elements to make a broader statement about society?

To Kill a Mockingbird & The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian:

1. How do both novels address issues of race, identity, and social justice? What makes these themes controversial in the context of cancel culture and book bans?
2. Compare the experiences of the young protagonists, Scout Finch and Junior. How do their stories reflect the challenges of growing up in a society with rigid norms and expectations?

The Scarlet Letter & American Psycho:

1. How do Nathaniel Hawthorne and Bret Easton Ellis use their protagonists, Hester Prynne and Patrick Bateman, to explore themes of sin, punishment, and societal judgment?
2. Discuss the different societal reactions to the protagonists' actions in each novel. How do these reactions relate to the concepts of cancel culture and book bans?

The Scarlet Letter & The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian:

1. How do both novels depict the struggles of individuals against societal norms and expectations? What are the consequences for Hester Prynne and Junior?
2. Compare the themes of isolation and resilience in both novels. How do these themes contribute to the controversy and potential for book bans?

**Personal reflection questions:**

1. After reading these novels, how has your understanding of cancel culture and book bans changed? Do you think these practices are more harmful or beneficial to society?
2. If you were in a position to decide whether a book should be banned, what criteria would you use to make your decision?
3. How do you think these novels would be received if they were published today? Would they face more or less criticism, and why?
4. Do you think the controversial elements in these books are necessary for the authors to convey their messages? Why or why not?

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You will then be asked to discuss a number of statements. The best way to prepare for this is to talk about the books a lot **in English**. Example statements are:

* Cancel culture can be seen as a necessary tool for holding individuals accountable for their harmful actions or statements.
* Cancel culture often focuses on individual actions, diverting attention from addressing systemic issues that require collective solutions.
* Banning books infringes on freedom of expression and limits people's access to diverse ideas and perspectives.
* Book bans often reflect societal norms and values at a particular time, and lifting bans can be a way to track societal progress.

And, if time allows, you might get some additional questions, such as:

* Did reading these work teach you anything worthwhile?
* Could you relate to the main character? Why (not)?
* Which of the characters in your books did you identify with most?
* Did you like the endings of your books? If you could change one, which would you pick and how would you change it?
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