M. A. Literature Exam

Guidelines for Creating Your Reading List

The English Department believes that the best way to complete one’s M.A. program in literature is to construct an individual reading list for the MA Exam. Developing such a list allows one to focus on his or her interests and concerns, while encountering a range of diverse and challenging works of literature.

Proposed reading lists must be submitted to the English Graduate Committee no later than October 15 for the spring exam, or March 15 for a fall exam. All lists should include at least four women writers and four writers of color. Selection of texts should follow the guidelines below:

The Medieval Era
- 1 long poem
- 5 medieval lyrics or ballads
- 1 play

16th and 17th Century English and 17th Century American
- 1 Shakespearean play
- 1 Non-Shakespearean play
- 1 long prose work
- 1 long poem
- 5 short poems by 1 writer

18th Century English and American
- 1 long prose work or novel
- 1 long poem
- 5 short poems by one writer

19th Century American and English or Anglophone
- 1 long prose work or novel (American)
- 1 long prose work or novel (English or Anglophone)
- 1 long poem (American)
- 1 long poem (English or Anglophone)
- 5 short poems by one writer
20th Century—Present American and English or Anglophone

- 1 long prose work or novel (American)
- 1 long prose work or novel (English or Anglophone)
- 1 long poem
- 5 short poems by one writer
- 1 play

Theory

Aristotle, *Poetics*
Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* (Chapters One and Two)
Foucault, *The Foucault Reader* (excerpts from “Docile Bodies,” “The Means of Correct Training,” “Complete and Austere Institutions,” and “Illegalities and Delinquency”)
Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (Chapters One and Two)
Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*

Suggested Texts for Your Reading List

The Medieval Era


16th and 17th Century English and 17th Century American

- 1 Shakespearean play: Choose any play by William Shakespeare.
- 1 Non-Shakespearean play: Choose from the following writers: Aphra Behn, Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher (worked both as co-authors and separately), Ben Jonson, Thomas Kyd, John Llyly, Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Middleton, John Webster.
Narrative of the Captivity and Restauration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson; Philip Sidney, The Defence of Poetry or The New Arcadia; Mary Wroth, The Countess of Montgomery’s Arcadia, Book I.

- 1 long poem. Choose from: John Dryden, Absalom and Achitophel; John Milton, Paradise Lost, Books 1 and 2; William Shakespeare, Sonnets; Philip Sidney, Astrophel and Stella (sonnet sequence); Edmund Spenser, Amoretti (sonnet sequence) or The Faerie Queene, Books 1 and 2; Michael Wigglesworth, The Day of Doom; Mary Wroth, Pamphilia to Amphilanthus (sequence of sonnets and songs).


18TH CENTURY ENGLISH AND AMERICAN


- 1 long poem. Alexander Pope, The Rape of the Lock or The Dunciad or Essay on Man; George Crabbe, The Village.

- 5 short poems by one writer. Choose from the following writers: Joel Barlow (pre-1800), William Collins, Timothy Dwight, Anne Finch, Philip Freneau, Thomas Gray, Mary Wortley Montagu, Alexander Pope, Mary Robinson, Charlotte Smith, Jonathan Swift, Phillis Wheatley.

19TH CENTURY AMERICAN AND ENGLISH OR ANGLOPHONE

- 1 long prose work or novel (American). Choose from the following writers: Louisa May Alcott, William Wells Brown, Kate Chopin, Anna Julia Cooper, Rebecca Harding Davis, James Fenimore Cooper, Stephen Crane, Frederick Douglass, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Frances Harper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, William Dean Howells, Washington Irving, Sarah Orne Jewett, Harriet Jacobs, Henry James, Herman Melville, Edgar Allan Poe, Catharine Maria Sedgwick, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Henry David Thoreau, Mark Twain, Harriet Wilson, Zitkala-Sa (Gertrude Bonnin).

- 1 long prose work or novel (English or Anglophone). Choose from the following writers: Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, Emily Bronte, Lewis Carroll, Joseph Conrad (pre-1900), Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Gissing, Thomas Hardy, Amy
Levy, Olive Schreiner, Mary Seacole, Mary Shelley, Rabindranath Tagore, Anthony Trollope.


**20th Century—Present American and English or Anglophone**


**Theory**

Aristotle, *Poetics*
Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* (Chapters One and Two)
Foucault, *The Foucault Reader* (excerpts from “Docile Bodies,” “The Means of Correct Training,” “Complete and Austere Institutions,” and “Illegalities and Delinquency”)
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**Sample Literature Exam Questions**

The exam consists of two parts.

*Part One:* This section of the exam comprises four hours of work on the morning of the exam day. Students will answer two questions, a *themes and issues* question and a *theory* question (each 2 hours). Students will be given a copy of their reading list.
Part Two: After a lunch break, students will return to take the second section of the exam (1 ½ hours), comprising a poem explication and analysis. To complete this section, students will be given the complete text of a poem.

Themes and Issues

Themes and issues will change from one semester to the next, although the form of the questions may remain substantially the same. In some cases, two themes or issues may be offered within a single question, and students may choose the one that best suits their lists.

Sample Questions:

- Choose three poets on your list from three different centuries, and discuss how their work (or one of their poems) engages with the idea of nature, either through direct depictions of nature or meditations on the subject. Consider the idea of nature in relation to both the content and form of the poetry you discuss. What similarities and differences do you find among the writers you have chosen? To what extent does each poet’s vision of nature reflect his or her era?
- For any three novels or prose works on your list, consider how the writers depict the issue of individual identity within (or against) the social fabric. For each work, consider the degree to which the individual protagonist (or narrator) identifies with or contends against the social norms of her or his community or society. What similarities and differences do you find? To what extent does each writer’s vision reflect his or her era?

Other themes and issues may include gender roles, ethnicity and cultural background, the child’s relation to society, children versus adults, shifting cultural norms in regard to childhood, archetypes of childhood, class issues, the image of the family, etc. When narrower topics are offered, students will be given a choice of topics (possibly within one question) so that they can make the best use of their individual lists.

Theory

The works of theory on the list will be the same for all students. The exam questions invite students to draw on theoretical works and approaches in their readings of the primary works on their individual lists. In general, these questions will ask students to discuss no more than three works: one work of theory and two primary texts. The emphasis will be on analyzing and evaluating theoretical works along with primary texts.

Sample Questions:

- Discuss two plays on your list through the lens of Aristotle’s Poetics. Pay particular attention to Aristotle’s idea of catharsis in your analysis. Be sure to discuss Aristotle’s work in detail and consider the strengths and/or possible limitations of the concept of catharsis in relation to the primary works you elucidate.
In Romancing the Shadow, Toni Morrison contends that “the imaginative and historical terrain upon which... American writers journeyed is in large measure shaped by the presence of the racial other.” For Morrison, how is the process of racial othering central to the historical process of constructing an American national identity? Explicate her argument in specific terms, with reference to at least one literary text analyzed by her in her essay.

Then go on to discuss the depiction of racial othering in two primary literary texts on your list. How is the process of othering portrayed, and how does it inflect characterization, narrative development, and/or major themes? The texts that you analyze may be works of American literature, but need not be. (As Morrison notes, “There also exists a European Africanism,” which operates through a related process of racial othering.) In conclusion, to what extent can Morrison’s analysis enrich your understanding of these primary texts?

Choose any of the critical texts on your list, and apply its theoretical perspective to any two primary texts on your list. Be sure to consider the advantages and limitations of the critical perspective you are employing.

POEM EXPICATION

For this part of the exam, students will submit with their proposed reading list three clean copies of three poems on their list (written by different writers). Each poem should be no more than one page in length. The committee will select one of these poems, and it will be given to the student when s/he comes in to take Part Two of the exam.

Students will be required to analyze and explicate the poem, using the text of the poem but no other sources during the exam. Note: Once students have selected their three poems, they will be excluded from discussing them in Part One of the exam.

Question: Explicate and analyze your poem in order to make an argument about its significance. You may choose to emphasize thematic, cultural, historical, or political significance, or issues of poetic innovation. In order to demonstrate your poem’s significance, consider the following elements:

• major themes, as well as any conflicts and contradictions that you find in the work
• poetic form (lyric, dramatic monologue, or narrative poetry; rhyme, meter, free verse, etc.)
• figurative language (imagery, symbolism, metaphor and simile), tone and point of view