

M.A. PROGRAM IN ENGLISH
ENG 6966—M.A. EXAM
INSTRUCTIONS AND GUIDELINES

(Revised 07.02.01; abbreviated version 12.02.03)

I: OVERVIEW

ENG 6966 is a one-credit hour independent study course that culminates in (a) a one-week take-home exam based on an individualized reading list and (b) a one-hour conference and exit interview with your exam committee.

Prior to the last semester of your program of studies you will need to **form an exam committee**. To this end you will need to **seek out one member of the Graduate English Faculty to serve as chair** and two others. In consultation with your committee, you will then **generate an individualized reading list** that includes representative and significant works of 32-36 authors and **write a short (2-3 page) rationale**. The reading list and rationale will form the basis of the M.A. Exam—a take-home final paper, up to 10 pages in length, on one of three questions your committee will give you. You will have one week to write a formal, analytic essay, which your committee may ask you to revise one or more times.

The purpose of the exam is to provide you with the occasion and the impetus to review the reading you have done, the critical perspectives you have gained, and the analytical methods you have practiced throughout your graduate career. The Graduate Faculty do not intend the paper to be a hurdle but a final opportunity to facilitate your efforts to synthesize and integrate your knowledge and showcase your interpretive skills.

II: REGISTERING FOR ENG 6966

- (1) Determine in which term you plan on registering to take the exam.
- (2) Inform the Graduate Coordinator. The Graduate Coordinator will check that you have completed or are soon to complete the Program requirements, including the various distribution and other course requirements.
- (3) At the start of the term in which you will be taking the M.A. Exam: **(a) get electronic permission from the Graduate Coordinator** and **(b) then register for ENG 6966**.
- (4) In that same term **apply to graduate at the Office of Records and Registration**. The deadline for application is listed in the Schedule of Courses each term.

III: FORMING AN EXAM COMMITTEE AND PREPARING FOR THE EXAM

- (1) You will need to ask three faculty members to serve on your committee and one of them to be chair. Most faculty are happy to serve, so feel free to seek them out. They will tell you if they are not available. Although you will be consulting with all members of your committee, you will likely be working most closely with your committee chair.
- (2) In consultation with your committee members, beginning with your chair, generate a

reading list and rationale. Be aware that different faculty have different perspectives concerning the nature of the reading list and the kind of statement or rationale that is to accompany it. Some reading lists are more traditional, focusing mainly on canonical works. Other lists are less traditional. You will need to shape your reading list in relation to the guidelines (see below).

Before you select your committee members, you will want to discuss with them their expectations about the reading list and rationale. You might want to have a preliminary draft of your reading list to review with them. Your committee members may very well ask you to add certain works to or delete certain works from your reading list. They often will ask for revisions to your rationale. You should provide yourself ample time for this process.

(3) In consultation with committee members, review the works on your reading list and prepare for the exam.

IV: THE EXAM PAPER

Format: You will have **seven (7) days** to compose a **formal critical analysis** in response to **one of three questions** your committee will generate. The paper is to be **no more than 10 pages in length**.

After your committee members have read it, **they may request revisions**. You have no time limit for the revisions.

Once you have turned in a draft that your committee members are willing to sign off on, you and they will schedule a **one-hour conference** in order to discuss your paper, your program, and your future and then to formally congratulate you on successfully completing the program.

Purpose: The intent of the exam is provide you with the opportunity, along with stimulus, the incentive, and the encouragement, to take stock of your study of literature, to review what you have learned, and to continue to integrate the knowledge of literature and literary criticism you have worked to acquire. The exam presents a final occasion for you to demonstrate your ability to analyze, criticize, and assess the works on your list by comparing and contrasting their respective handling of certain issues; to develop a set of arguments about a group of disparate works; to draw connections among the works under consideration; to support your assertions by citing and examining the details of relevant passages from the texts; and to explain the implications of your observations and evaluations. Thus, the paper is to be a formal analysis of various works of literature in which you indicate your ability to read texts closely.

Grading. ENG 6966 is pass/fail.

Time-Table for Completion of the reading list and rational. You should plan on the exam taking a month. It may take longer; it is not likely to take less than two weeks. How long will depend on **(a)** how long it takes your committee to read your paper, **(b)** how quickly you can make any revisions your committee might request, and **(c)** how soon you and your committee can arrange to meet to review your paper and program.





You and your committee members need to give yourselves adequate lead time to schedule the final meeting. You and they need to double-check on everyone's availability, especially if you are planning on meeting during the summer.

V: FACULTY EXPECTATIONS




The Graduate Faculty have every expectation that you will do well. We want to give you as much encouragement, guidance, and moral support as possible. We look forward to your success.

VI: GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR THE READING LIST




Scope: The reading list is not intended to be limited to your favorite works, authors, or genre. It should focus on texts important for an understanding of the nature and history of literature. To this end it should include:

-  Representative and significant works of 32-36 authors, principally British and American, though the list may also include works by authors of other nationalities.
-  Works both before and after 1800.
-  Works from different genres: fiction, poetry, and drama. Works from other genres—for example, criticism and theory, biography, autobiography, and memoir—are also possible
-  Works representing a range of outlooks and values.

Representative Works of Fiction, Poetry, and Drama:

-  For each fiction writer, at least one novel or an equivalent number of short stories.
-  For each poet, a substantial selection of poems. Initial drafts of many reading lists have tended not to include a sufficient number of poems for each poet.
-  For each playwright, three full-length plays.

Other Reading List Entries:

-  **Film:** 3 films will constitute the equivalent of one author's works.
-  **Works by more than one author as a single entry:**
 - Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, and Euripides' *The Bacchae*.
 - The Pearl* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.
-  **Works of literary criticism:** Most reading lists have not included individual works of literary criticism or theory; some have; a very few have included an entire grouping of such works.

VII: EXAMPLES OF READING LIST ENTRIES FOR INDIVIDUAL AUTHORS

| | |
|----------------------------|---|
| Shakespeare | 3-4 plays. |
| T. S. Eliot | “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” “The Waste Land,” “The Hollow Men,” and “Four Quartets”; “Tradition and the Individual Talent” |
| Walt Whitman | “Song of Myself.” |
| William Wordsworth | Books I and III from <i>The Prelude</i> , “Tintern Abbey,” the Intimations Ode, “Michael,” and “Nutting” |
| Virginia Woolf | <i>To the Lighthouse</i> and <i>A Room of One’s Own</i> |
| Flannery O’Connor | <i>Wise Blood</i> and a selection of stories |
| Nathaniel Hawthorne | <i>The Scarlet Letter</i> and several short stories |
| Roland Barthes | <i>S/Z</i> |
| Michel Foucault | <i>The History of Sexuality</i> |

VIII: A SUGGESTION ON HOW TO BEGIN

As a preliminary step, you might consider entering on a grid the authors and titles of the various works you are considering for your list:

| | American | British | World |
|-----------------------------|----------|---------|-------|
| Fiction Later Earlier | | | |
| Poetry Later Earlier | | | |
| Drama Later Earlier | | | |

The purpose of this grid is to clarify the extent to which you have included works both before and after 1800; works from more than one genre; American and British works; and so on. It may also help guide your thinking about the possible relations among the works and thus may facilitate your reflections on the rationale.

You will not be asked to have entries in all nine cells. Many reading lists focus exclusively on American and British works. Whether or not you include other literature will be between you and your committee. Regardless of the nationality of the works you select, **you will be expected to have some significant historical coverage—a number of works from two or more centuries—of one of the major genres (fiction, poetry, drama).**

IX: DRAFTING A RATIONALE

The function of the rationale is to encourage you to reflect on the interpretive issues and protocols you have encountered and to do so in relation to your intellectual development and possible future. The purpose of the rationale, like that of the exam paper, is to encourage you to reflect on what you have learned about analyzing, evaluating, and appreciating literary works that you did not know at the outset of your program. What, for example, have you come to understand about the power of literature and the nature of literary criticism? What has been most surprising and unexpected? The most challenging? What themes or questions have most engaged you, why, and with what consequences? In what directions might your interests be taking you? What methods, approaches, perspectives, or theories have you come to appreciate?

Some rationales are more personal than others. Many have been intellectual autobiographies.

Be aware that the members of your committee may very well use your rationale as a basis for generating exam paper questions. You may get paper questions not just about the specific works on your list but about how in your rationale you set up possible relations among them, or about why you group them together in one way and not another. For this reason you need to reflect on not just what you are including but what you are excluding.

Finally, be prepared to be asked to revise your rationale, perhaps several times.

X. TYPICAL EXAM QUESTIONS

(1) According to Sartre, “hell is other people.” How do the works of four or five authors on your list affirm, argue against, complicate, or in any other way address the possibility Sartre announces about the relation of humans to one another?

(2) Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” ends with the famous lines:

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,--that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”

Using Keats’s poem as a point of reference, examine the relation the relation of truth to beauty in four or five works on your list, selected across genre and period.

(3) Using Maya Angelou’s autobiography as a point of reference, examine how the works of four other authors on your list would answer the question, “why does the caged bird sing?”

(4) “Long miles of road then opened out before my mind, and toiling on, I saw a ragged way-worn boy forsaken and neglected, who should come to call even the heart now beating against him, his own.” Using this remark in Dickens’ great work, *David Copperfield*, as a touchstone, examine how the major characters in the works of four other authors (two American, two British) from your list become aware of heartbeats--their own as well as that of others. What does it take to be able to hear the beating of the heart? What deafens such hearing?

(5) “It is useless to go back to men writers for help,” Virginia Woolf writes in *A Room of*

One's Own, “however much one may go to them for pleasure.” Why? Because “the weight, the pace, the strikes of a man's mind are too unlike her own for her to lift anything substantial from him successfully. . . . A book is not made of sentences laid end to end, but of sentences built, if an image helps, into arcades of domes. And this shape too has been made by men out of their own needs for their own uses.”

What shapes are constructed in and by the works of four authors from your list (British and American, male or female or both), and what needs or uses as well as pleasures do they serve? Are these shapes gender marked? Are there shapes proper to the feminine? Does any work manage to evoke a shape that transcends gender?

(6) Near the beginning of Hawthorne’s story “The Birthmark,” the narrating voice describes how “in the centre of Georgiana’s left cheek there was a singular mark, deeply interwoven, as it were, with the texture and substance of her face.” Using Hawthorne’s story as an initial point of departure, examine how characters in four other works (two American, two British) acquire a “singular mark,” whatever this marking (which is perhaps both metonymical and metaphorical) might be. Explain how it is “deeply interwoven, as it were, with the texture and substance” of what makes them who they are. From where does the marking come? What is its possible significance?

(7) Near the end of *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, Barthes includes two sections, “The Uncertainty of Signs” and “Thus,” each prefaced with a short comment about “the amorous subject.” Consider how these two comments might be used as a guide for understanding that other strange lover, the writer (of fiction, of poetry, of drama).

From “The Uncertainty of Signs”: Whether he seeks to prove his love, or to discover if the other loves him, the amorous subject has no system of sure signs at his disposal.

From “Thus”: Endlessly required to define the loved object, and suffering from the uncertainties of this definition, the amorous subject dreams of a knowledge which would let him take the other **as he is**, thus and no other, exonerated from any adjective.

Focusing on the works of any four authors, discuss how they handle the conflict between the dream of being free from the uncertainty of signs and the recognition that there is “no system of sure signs at [their] disposal.”

(8) At the very end of Edwidge Danticat’s novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Grandme Ife says to Sophie Caco at her mother’s funeral in Dame Marie, Haiti:

“There is always a place where, if you listen closely in the night, you will hear your mother telling a story and at the end of the tale, she will ask you this questions: **Ou libere?** Are you free?”

My grandmother quickly pressed her fingers over my lips.
“Now,” she said, “you will know how to answer.”

The goal or objective is, presumably, to be able to answer that question in the affirmative.

Choose several texts from your list that ask the **Ou libere** questions, although not perhaps so explicitly as *Breath, Eyes, Memory* asks it. And develop an essay in which you consider some of the possible meanings of “freedom,” some of the names it is known by.

(9) A number of works on your list seem to involve tests, or challenges: Hedvig’s love is tested in *The Wild Duck*; Everyman (in the play of that title) faces the supreme Christian trial; in *Frankenstein*, Victor challenges Nature itself with his Creature; Madeline’s commitment is under attack in *The Inheritors*; and so on.

So, Perhaps it is frightfully poetic (or frightfully ironic, or at least appropriate in some small way), to ask you, as you face this, your own test, to write an essay about tests and challenges. Please use four works (and you may use some, but not all, of the above suggestions) and discuss the various challenges characters face and the various resolutions of those tests. Do different cultures and different eras place different premiums on the experience of having one’s loyalty, faith, love, or intellect tested?

(10) Using *The Saga of the Volsungs* or *Beowulf*, a Greek play, and a modern work, argue either for a conception of tragedy (perhaps drawn from Aristotle) which transcends culture (at least in these cases) or for types of tragedy peculiar to the cultures of origins of the works. In either case, please share your thoughts on the shaping influence of cultural context in the works you choose.

(11) Consider the degree to which and the modes in which *The Odyssey*, *The Divine Comedy*, *Don Quixote*, *Gulliver's Travels*, and *A Doll's House* are all concerned to depict veridical experience. Discuss their enactments of realism. Please share any thoughts on the project of generalizing about subject-object relationships in Western literature.