

# **Non-Thesis Track Guidelines**

**M.A. in Literature**



**Inside, you will find answers to frequently asked questions about the non-thesis track for the M.A. in Literature program.**

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## **Non-Thesis-Track Guidelines for M.A. in Literature Students**

### **I. As a non-thesis-track student, what special requirements do I need to meet to graduate?**

Instead of writing a thesis, you will be required to choose an Area of Emphasis, called a Cognate by the Graduate College and take a two-hour examination on that emphasis. As part of your coursework, you will develop that area of emphasis by taking 3 classes (9 credits) in that area, not counting any course which you may be using to satisfy the Major requirement at the top of your degree outline. In addition to the Area Examination, you will need to pass the four-hour General Examination that is offered once per semester for all graduate Literature students.

### **II. How do I choose an Area of Emphasis?**

Your area of emphasis needs to be related either by period, subject, or genre. It can't be something extremely broad, such as American literature, or literature by women, or poetry, but it need not be very narrow, either. Examples, among a great many, might include American ethnic literature, or literature by British women, or contemporary poetry, or children's literature.

You should choose a topic that interests you and that corresponds with the teaching interests of graduate English faculty at Texas State. For a complete listing of English Graduate Faculty and their teaching interests, go to <http://ma.english.txstate.edu> and click on Faculty.

### **III. Once I know what I want my area of emphasis to be, what do I need to do?**

Make sure that you complete at least 3 courses (9 credits) of graduate study that relate to that Area of Emphasis. If you have a Minor, or if your area of emphasis involves another discipline, you may, if you wish, include as many as 3 of the 9 credits which you took outside of the English Department. For example, if you are Minor in history and you choose Irish literature as your area of emphasis, you could take a graduate-level Irish history course as part of the 9 credits.

You also need to put together an Area Examination committee. You should note that only Graduate Faculty may serve. For a list of the Graduate Faculty, go to [http://www.gradcollege.txstate.edu/Fac\\_Resources/Grad\\_Fac.html](http://www.gradcollege.txstate.edu/Fac_Resources/Grad_Fac.html). If you are still unsure whether a professor is a member of the Graduate Faculty, ask the Director of Graduate Study in English in FH 358, at 245-7685, or at [malit@txstate.edu](mailto:malit@txstate.edu).

The committee members must have some expertise in the area you have chosen for your emphasis. These committee members will help you to draw up a reading list for your Area Examination. The list will include 15-20 of the most important book-length works in the area. Most will be primary works, but a few could be volumes of criticism or theory. A substantial group of short pieces could substitute for a book or two.

The committee members will also write the exam and grade it. If you have a Minor, or if your area of emphasis involves another discipline, you may choose one of the three committee members from the Graduate Faculty of another department at Texas State.

#### **IV. How do I start forming my Area Examination committee?**

First you will need to choose someone to chair the committee. You will be working with this faculty member the most frequently, so choose a professor with whom you are comfortable and whose academic methods and viewpoints are compatible with yours. If the professor agrees to serve as chair, he or she may have suggestions regarding the other members of your committee. Ask two other Graduate Faculty members if they would be willing to serve on your committee.

**V. When do I need to start putting together my Area Examination committee?**

As soon as you are sure what your Area of Emphasis will be, it is a good idea to start putting your committee together. Your committee will help you draw up the reading list for your Area Examination, so the sooner you put together your committee, the sooner you can begin working on your reading list and preparing yourself for the exam.

**VI. How do I decide what books to select for my reading list?**

You will meet with the chair of your committee and together you will draw up a list of 15 to 20 book-length works related to your area of emphasis. The chair will then go over that list with the other members of your committee for suggestions and approval. Once all three committee members have approved the list, the chair of your committee will give you a copy of the list.

**VII. When do I take the Area Examination?**

Generally, students take the Area Examination during their last semester of graduate study; however, you can choose to take the Examination earlier if you wish. There are advantages to

taking the Exam earlier. For example, if you do not pass the Exam, you have the option of retaking it and still graduating on time.

The report from your committee must be received by the Graduate College no later than ten working days before your Commencement ceremony. After you take the Exam, your committee Chair will need time to distribute your exam to the other committee members, all three members will need time to read the Exam, the committee might need time to resolve any disagreements, and then your chair will need time to complete the paperwork and get it to the Graduate College. To be safe, then, it would be best to take the Exam at least four weeks before Commencement. If your Committee agrees beforehand, you might, if necessary, be able to get away with a little less than this.

#### **VIII. What is the Exam's format?**

As instructed at the Exam, you will write one or two essays. If asked to write one essay, you will typically have two or three from which to choose. If asked to write two essays, you will typically have three or four from which to choose. You may choose to write on a computer or in blue books, making these arrangements with your committee chair.

### **IX. How will my exam be graded?**

All of the members of your committee will read your Exam and evaluate it as Passing with Distinction, Passing, or Not Passing. The evaluation Passing with Distinction is rare and must be a unanimous decision.

### **X. What happens if I don't pass my Area Examination?**

You can retake the Exam once. If your second try is still Not Passing, then your only option is to address a written appeal to the Department Chair, asking for a third and final attempt. The appeal letter will not succeed unless it convincingly explains, in detail, why the third attempt is likely to succeed.

### **Appendix: Sample Area Examination (on Modern Irish Literature)**

Reading list:

Wilde: *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Yeats: *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, *The Tower*, *The Winding Stair*

Synge: *The Playboy of the Western World*, *Riders to the Sea*

Shaw: *Saint Joan*, *Major Barbara*

Joyce: *A Portrait of the Artist, Ulysses*  
O'Casey: *The Shadow of a Gunman, Juno and the Paycock*  
Flann O'Brien: *At Swim-Two-Birds, The Third Policeman*  
Beckett: *Waiting for Godot, Endgame, Three Novels (Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable)*

Questions: Write essays on any two of the following four questions. You have a total of two hours.

1. Several of the writers on your list are regarded as experimentalists. Select two or three works from the list that break significantly with past literary conventions. Write an essay explaining what makes these works experimental and state whether you think the experimentation is successful.
2. Some have argued that Shaw's plays fail as drama because his characters talk too much and often sound too much like Shaw. Is this a fair criticism of *Major Barbara*? Why or why not?
3. Discuss the role of Irish political history and Irish Nationalism in the work of at least three of the authors on your reading list. Be as specific as possible regarding both the works and the historical/political events and issues the works reference.
4. Discuss how at least three of the writers on

your list (chose at least one prose work and one work of poetry) use the mythical/mystical Irish past as a means for exploring "Irishness" and the Irish national character.

**Passing essays:**

1. James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, and Flann O'Brien all broke with previous literary conventions in their works, making them essentially experimentalists in writing. The works that best illustrate this departure from the norm are Joyce's *Ulysses*, Beckett's *Three Novels*, and O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*. In the course of this essay, we investigate what makes these works experimental in nature and whether the authors were successfully or not in their endeavors.

James Joyce created a literary experiment that would become the equivalent of a benchmark with his novel *Ulysses*, published in 1922. The author purposefully created a work that was so complex that many readers still do not understand it to this day. Joyce felt the desire to test the limits of nearly every convention of the novel, and successfully accomplished this at every turn. It is difficult to decide exactly where to begin discussing the experimental nature of the text because every page and every chapter offers features that are unique to the

reader. Therefore, we will just start with the most obvious and proceed from there.

The feature of the novel that garners the majority of discussion is its reliance on the “stream of consciousness” narration. While this was not new at the time of *Ulysses*’ publication, Joyce did use this device in a manner that both propels the narrative and defeats the reader’s linear progression simultaneously. The characters of Stephen Dedalus, Leopold Bloom, and Molly Bloom all exhibit this wandering type of narration throughout the novel. Each character has a distinctive way of seeing the world and relating events that is both intriguing and bewildering to the casual reader.

Stephen Dedalus’ mind wanders from the present to the past with maddening speed. As he walks along the Strand, he thinks of past loves, lessons of Aristotle and Aquinas, various snippets of poems and songs, and other sensations forcing the reader to divert continuously from the narrative at hand. His particular type of narration is so complex because it requires so much of the reader. Joyce expects his “implied reader” to have a vast knowledge of Irish history, Catholic doctrine, and general trivia in order to make complete sense of the daily musings of this very complex character. Stephen’s thoughts also reflect previous experiences from other Joyce novels such as *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Dubliners*, and even the unpublished

*Stephen Hero*. The combination of all of these factors makes a chapter like *Proteus* a veritable goldmine to scholars and a potential nightmare to the regular reader. Joyce's experiment here in narration is successful, but only to the degree the reader is willing to put forth the effort to understand the text completely.

The "stream of consciousness" that Leopold Bloom exhibits is a little different from that of Stephen. His mind also wanders, but in a different fashion. Bloom notices sensations and smells that Stephen's analytical mind would probably miss. He is much more attuned to the sensual world; often making observations regarding the way certain foods taste, a bar smells, or the peculiar dimensions of a woman's backside. Bloom's mind is, of course, continuously in a state of denial as the day progresses about the potential adulterous affair his wife is having at home. This is a further complication to his particular narrative and it taints his views of events throughout the book. The reader does not know this has such a profound effect on his mood and thought processes until nearly the end of the novel. We are aware that he is being cuckolded, but the extent that he is continuously, recursively returning to Molly's (Penelope's) bed is only evident upon subsequent reads of the novel.

Molly's particular brand of "stream of consciousness" is one of the most fluid, feminine

discourses in the entire book. The last chapter, with its seemingly never-ending sentences, allows the reader to experience the inner workings of a mind completely unlike those of Stephen and Poldy. Molly's thoughts, as she slips off to sleep, flit backwards and forwards between her past life, current situation, and the events of the day. Her narration is frequently interspersed with colloquialisms and feminine musings that would be completely out of place in the minds of the other characters. She thinks about her affair during the day with Boylan almost lustily and seems to give herself a quiet, resigned reason for the marital lapse. Molly remembers past loves in her life, memories of her father, and of a younger Leopold that entice the reader into a sympathetic understanding of her motives. It is also through her narration that Joyce sets the stage for the more experimental structure of *Finnegan's Wake*, his "night" novel.

Aside from the obvious "stream of consciousness," Joyce performs other experiments in this novel. He alternates narrators and point-of-view throughout the text, and expects the reader to understand this and simply "keep up." One moment the reader sees the world through the eyes of Bloom, and the next moment we are in the mind of a girl on the beach. These changes occur without any predictable patterns and the reader is constantly looking for a narrative solid ground that may

never really exist.

Joyce also makes use of a plethora of styles in *Ulysses*, effectively creating a sense of aporia in the mind of the reader. The novel jumps from a seemingly simple, linear story to a newspaper office with headlines, to a bizarrely dreamlike play, to a retelling of Irish history (complete with lists), to a chapter that includes multitudes of different parodies of English literary conventions and styles. Through all of this, Joyce still manages to keep the storyline intact and moving along, albeit nonlinearly.

This enormous reliance on experimentation in *Ulysses* is one of the reasons other authors such as Samuel Beckett felt compelled to create unique works of literary such as his *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, and The Unnamable*. These three books, which link together in style as well as characters, even read separately, ultimately exist as a united work of creative experimentation. We will discuss some of these features.

The most obvious trait of these novels is their almost willful disregard for time and reader attentiveness. Beckett writes on for page after page without a paragraph break, and many times even without simple punctuation. He expects the reader to give up any idea of putting this book down and simply stepping away from the storyline. The peregrinations and pitfalls of Molloy, Malone, and Mahood require an attentive reader like no other novel. The plotline shifts

indiscernible and quickly, characters appear and then disappear like items in the room, thoughts are pronounced and then never discussed again, all within the space of a page or two. The feeling of disconnect is profound and the coldness produced is at first stifling, and yet intriguing.

Then there is Beckett's use of profanity or vulgarity at odd times to shock the reader into consciousness. He discusses the workings of the body, decay of the flesh, and the realities of sex with a frankness that might be off-putting to some readers. This goes far beyond the simple bathroom exploits of Leopold Bloom, as the reader feels almost uncomfortable by the words on the page. Beckett offers an unflinching look at the world and all of its stagnant realities in an experiment to uncover the depths of man.

Beckett also makes use of distance and isolation through the novels. His characters are utterly alone, and the reader senses this from the opening paragraphs of each novel. The degree of isolation is the only uncertainty, and how the author manages to remove every vestige of humanity as the books progress, is his primary concern. His characters have precious little to lose, a piece of pencil, a stick, the view from a jar, but all manage to have these taken away as their isolation and separation from the world becomes complete. There is a sadness in this experiment, a feeling of loss that maybe difficult for the regular reader to understand. This is not a pleasant

trip to the countryside or a visit to a neighbor's house, but a probable descent into madness and possible absolute dislocation from the world as we know it.

The final author, Flann O'Brien, uses many experimental devices in his novel *At Swim-Two-Birds*, making it the spiritual son of *Ulysses*, although more comical and lighthearted. O'Brien relies on some of the same tactics as his predecessors Joyce and Beckett, but employs these in a much different way. His novel is brilliant in its willful disregard of literary conventions and its use of various others.

O'Brien uses comedy throughout his novel to propel the story line, that is quite complex in and of itself. He starts the novel with the announcement that there will be three separate beginnings, and the endings are nearly as plentiful. He also uses narrators that are borrowed from fiction, Irish history, and from other sources to further complicate the book. Truly, this literary tour de force is difficult to reduce to a few lines in an essay, but I will attempt to hit the high-points.

O'Brien uses multiple narrators and beginnings because the book is structured unlike anything previously written. It is a book written by an author, about a book written by an author, about a book written by a character-in the same novel. This becomes further complicated because the author himself routinely drinks, falls asleep,

loses a part of the manuscript, and refers the reader back to synopsis' within the text for enlightenment. The author's unique design takes a little getting used to, but when that is accomplished the novel unfolds for the reader in a quite lovely and entertaining manner.

O'Brien also breaks with literary tradition by toying with various conventions of Irish literary history as well. Just like Joyce's bigger than life "citizen," O'Brien uses the character of Finn MacCool to poke fun at the mystical history of Ireland. This character is larger than life, and is described in a manner that makes ample use of epic lists and hyperbole, as well as bard-like storytelling to further (or convolute) the plot. It is through this character that O'Brien experiments with the ballad form and offers the engaging, if not lengthy, tale of Irish legend Sweeney. Another character, speaking of the famous Jem Casey, a poet of the people, interrupts this poem as well. O'Brien interjects porter-laced humor at this point, proving "A Pint of Plain is You Only Man;" surely one of the novels most hilarious moments.

The experimental nature of the works of James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, and Flann O'Brien ensure that these writings will continue to be read for years to come. These masters of prose managed to try something different and succeeded at creating works that set the standard for the postmodern era. I believe their experiments

in literary form, characterization, and unique narration were successful because they had a strong sense of where Irish Literature had already been before-and where it might be going in the future.

2. Many authors writing during the early twentieth century in Ireland included references to political history and Irish nationalism in their works. The writings of James Joyce, W.B. Yeats, and Sean O'Casey all include many allusions and occasionally direct mentions of these elements of Irish life. In fact, one could argue that this indeed comprises the backbone of many of these works, reflecting not only the beliefs of the author, but of the Irish populace as well.

James Joyce included numerous references to Irish political events in nearly everything he wrote. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* begins with a small boy's realization that his aunt has different colored brushes for Michael Davitt and Parnell in her case. Dante has strong, negative feelings about Parnell and believes he lost his office, and probably his life, for good reason. Interestingly, Stephen's father feels differently in the matter and the heated exchange over this fallen demigod of Irish politics erupts famously in the argument some pages later at the Christmas table. Joyce's character Stephen, even at a very young age, can sense that politics is an extremely volatile subject in the household

and the battle lines are clearly drawn. Young Stephen believes, like his father, in the goodness of Parnell, and despite what Dante says about Kitty O'Shea and the like, little sways his way of thinking at this point.

Joyce also references the Phoenix Park murders, a politically motivated hit, in this novel and more completely in *Ulysses*. In fact, throughout *Ulysses* the reader encounters characters influenced one way or the other by politics. Consider the forceful character of Mr. Deasy, Stephen's schoolmaster, who believes that "Ulster is always right" and espouses the values of England to the young teacher. Then there is "the citizen" who believes so strongly in Irish Home Rule and the IRA that he is willing to get into a fistfight with Leopold Bloom in the bar. This character represents the far extreme, the belief that Irish men ought to be playing Irish games, drinking Irish stout, and speaking Irish in a free and united Ireland. To this, Poldy counters that he actually knew Griffith and might have given him the idea for Sinn Fein, which just about drives "the citizen" and his dog Garry Owen over the edge. The resulting biscuit-tin missile is this character's final remark on the importance of Irish independence.

W.B. Yeats also made ample use of Irish political history in his poetry. His "Easter, 1916" is in direct response to the Easter Uprising that caused so much chaos in Dublin. Yeats refers to

Maud Gonne, John MacBride, and others who were directly involved with the uprising, many of whom lost their lives, as a result in this poem. To the author, everything has “changed, changed utterly” because of this “terrible beauty” born of the Irish struggle to be free. He also references this event in “Sixteen Dead Men” and names some of the men executed because of the Easter events. He compares them to Wolfe Tone and Lord Edward, both leaders of an earlier uprising in the late 1700’s.

Yeats does not necessarily believe that violence is the best course of action, as some of his other poems relate. In “The Leaders of the Crowd,” Yeats seems to lament the common man that is caught up in the violence and fervor surrounding this struggle. Many good men and women died or found themselves in prison because of this fight for independence. He also sees, as in “The Second Coming” that this politics and violence is part of an evil with possibly world changing consequences. In another poem, “In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markeivez,” Yeats almost regrets that he cannot turn back the hands of time and redeem his lost friend from the life that politics tainted.

Additionally, nearly every poem that refers to Maud Gonne, and the loss of their potential love (be she Sheba or Leda), has something negative to say about politics in Ireland.

Finally, Sean O'Casey saturated his drama with Irish politics and themes of nationalism. His play *Juno and the Paycock* has a great deal to do with both of these subjects. Johnny Boyle, the son of Juno and Jack, is a "soldier" for Ireland that loses an arm, plus partial use of his legs, defending his country. There is a hinted suggestion that he betrays one of his friends, who is fighting for the other side, and that the IRA assassinates this boy. At the end of the play, Johnny himself is gunned down in apparent retaliation for the killing of this friend, leaving both mothers on opposite sides to lament the loss of sons to such a cause.

In O'Casey's *Shadow of a Gunman*, the theme of Irish nationalism and politics permeates every scene. The character Seamus is working with another fellow, MacGuire, who happens to be active in the IRA. Seamus misses his trip with him to Knocksedean where the English-backed police or Black and Tans kill MacGuire. He leaves a suitcase in Seamus and Davoren's apartment that we later discover contains bombs. Other characters in the tenement house that Davoren and Seamus occupy are sympathetic to the cause of the IRA and want to use them as a sort of terrorist force to keep order in the building. One character, Minnie, falls in love with Davoren in the misguided belief that he is an IRA gunman. As the English Bobbies raid the tenement, Minnie takes the suitcase filled with bombs to her room and they find it. The tragic

ending comes when the police force, ambushed by the IRA on the way back to the station, shoot Minnie as she tries to escape.

O'Casey's plays contain so much Irish nationalist rhetoric and political intrigue because that was his environment and reality. His work reflects the very dangerous, impassioned fight of the Irish people to free themselves from the yoke of English rule. His characters are often pawns, on one side of the battle or the other, and have very little actual ability to change their lives because of the poverty and violence surrounding them.

The themes of Irish nationalism and Irish politics reoccur so frequently in the works of Joyce, Yeats, and O'Casey because that was the reality of what Ireland was at this time in history. It was a dangerous place to be, and yet, it still managed to offer the fertile ground necessary for great literature to emerge. The reader cannot ignore these themes in the writings about Ireland at the beginning of the twentieth-century. The passion, the violence, and the struggles were very real, and this colored every aspect of daily Irish life from the poetry written to the plays produced.