

Literature MA Exam: Questions

Question 1) Social-Historical-Cultural Issues Through Periods.

Draw up a list of three literary works that represent a key social issue or cultural trend that you are interested in discussing. The goal of this question is to demonstrate the dynamic process that defines how literary texts are always in dialogue with other texts, cultures, and histories. The texts must represent three different historical literary periods. In a paragraph below the list, discuss how you might use these texts to discuss the change or evolution of the social-cultural trend you see them addressing. You might consider: Is your analysis focusing on stasis or change? How do these texts stage, dramatize, respond to this issue/trend? How do these texts shape the discussion? In whose interests are they working to represent the issue? How does the genre of the text matter? How does the text belong to a literary movement or genre that in turn makes its place in the larger dialogue important or significant?

Question 2) Explore a Theoretical Approach

Draw up a list of three literary works from different historical literary periods from the exam list or from one of your graduate classes that you would use to explore an important theoretical approach you learned in Literature 511 (or in other graduate Literature seminars). Do not replicate the critical approach or texts used in question number one. Below the list, define the theoretical approach in terms of its history in the profession of English literature, and how it responds to questions of textual politics, aesthetics, or theories of power. Including a quotation from a primary theorist about this approach is recommended. Discuss these questions: Why does this approach appeal to you? Can you articulate its value or merit in terms of how it might be employed by the reader/teacher? What questions does this approach answer or address? This is not an “application of theory” question; rather, can you explain how your literary texts help to stage the theory? How do they respond to its central tenets? How do the poetic/narrative texts “think” theoretically about the issues/problems raised by the theory?

Literature MA Exam: Process

The exam is offered the first Friday in August and the first Friday in December, from 9am-1pm.

The purpose of the Literature MA exam is to give students a chance to demonstrate their ability to discuss literature works from a range of periods, cultures, and genres with attention to historical/cultural shifts (Question 1) and theoretical issues (Question 2).

Over the course of your exam, you will write about **six different literary works** representing at least **five** different literary periods* and at least **three** different genres, generally poetry, prose, and drama.

Students should go through the following steps in preparing for the exam:

1. Select a Mentor.
2. Question 1: Working with your Mentor, select either a theoretical quotation about interchanges between literature and historical context or a quotation from a historical document (or image (s) or other object or class of objects) around which you plan to center your question along with three literary works through you plan to explore your historical/cultural issue.
3. Question 2: Working with your Mentor, select a theoretical quotation around which you plan to build your question and three literary works through which you plan to explore your theoretical issue.
4. Once your Mentor has approved your questions, these should be sent, cc'ing your Mentor, to the Literature Coordinator for final approval.
5. On the day of the exam, you will come into a computer lab to write your answers. You will find a printout of your exam questions waiting for you. Make sure to back up your answers frequently and to save backups. MAKE SURE YOU REMEMBER YOUR EMU LOGIN NAME AND PASSWORD! You will need these to log into your computer in the lab.
6. Literature faculty assess exam answers in rotating committees of three. MA Exam Committee members review each exam assessing:
 - The student's ability to discuss literary works in relation to theoretical issues in a sustained and nuanced way (avoiding plot summary, say, and focusing on theoretically informed readings of passages, style, or structure).
 - Students' ability to develop a theoretically nuanced argument about the interchange between specific literary works and shifts or developments in a cultural issue or idea.

* For the purposes of the exam, different literary periods are: Medieval, Renaissance, 17th Century, 18th Century, Romantic, Victorian, Modernism, Mid to Late 20th Century, and 21st Century.

Tips for Preparing (aka building the strongest possible exam):

Best preparation: a list of arguments

Have in mind key scenes, characters, events, or even basic phrases from the text that support your argument

Make sure to focus on arguments that compare either 2 primary texts or one primary and one theoretical or cultural text. Do not just discuss texts in isolation.

On the day of the exam:

Make sure to know or bring you EMU log-in information so that you can log into your computer.

Make sure to bring or know your E#

All exams are read anonymous by a rotating team of 3 faculty members. so please only use your E# on your exam – not your name.