

# **M.A. Comprehensive Exam**

## **Statement of Expectations**

### **British and American Literature**

#### **Purpose:**

The M.A. exam tests skills in analyzing literature in English across a broad range of periods and genres, and the ability to write about literature articulately and correctly. An M.A. student should have a general understanding of such things as authorial style, genre conventions, and literary periods, and an ability to find out useful background about previously unfamiliar works. The M.A. candidate should also show a professional level of writing about literary works, not just in grammatical sentences and organized paragraphs, but with a sense of the “scholarly conversations” about these texts.

#### **Preparation:**

The M.A. exam reading list generally covers a wide range of periods and genres. In preparing for the exam, candidates should read all works on the list, thoroughly and carefully.

Candidates should also read one or two significant works of criticism (essays and/or books) for each work on the list, where these are available. These need not be specifically on the work in question; they might be about the author, period, or genre, particularly in the case of very recent literary works, which have not yet received critical attention. For help locating relevant works of criticism, students may wish to reach out to a professor specializing in the respective field.

It is also advisable to read some other literature contemporary to the works on the list, if students are not familiar with the genre and period through coursework. For example, if the list includes a play by Marlowe and the candidate has taken a Shakespeare course, that course would provide useful context; but if the candidate has never studied any Renaissance drama, it would be useful to read one or two plays from the period, for comparative purposes.

In general, it is useful to be able to recognize works on the reading list as “characteristic” of their period or “unusual” for their period. Reading a reputable encyclopedia’s or anthology’s overview of historical and literary trends can go a long way to provide suitable context for works on the reading list.

#### **Writing the exam:**

Questions are generally about themes that can be traced through multiple works on the reading list. Candidates are expected to consider at least 2-3 works in answering each question.

Candidates should engage extensively with the texts on the reading list, and refer as they are able to criticism and contemporary works not on the list, to provide context for arguments about the listed works.

In writing the exam, candidates are expected to make connections among texts based on points such as themes, historical settings and issues, and formal characteristics (such as verse forms,

textual divisions, literary style). Candidates should show familiarity with general characteristics of genres (novel, drama, poetry) and of general trends within a period (characteristics of or developments within, for example, the nineteenth-century novel, seventeenth-century drama, twentieth-century poetry, etc.).

**Writing style:**

The candidate's writing should be clear, articulate, and grammatically sound. Essays should be clearly structured, opening with an argumentative thesis statement, and supporting points through references to the texts. Attention should remain firmly on the primary texts from the reading list, with other reading used to develop points through comparison and contrast.