**The Comprehensive Examination (Capstone B)**

The comprehensive exam is one of the English MA program’s three capstone options, the others being the master’s thesis and the special project. It is a five-question exam based on a short reading list of primary texts. The exam, administered twice each year, is divided over two days, typically a Friday and Saturday in late March or early April and again in late October or early November. Students answer three questions in four hours on the first day, and two questions in three hours on the second day. Students must have at least a 3.00 GPA at the time they apply to take the exam. Deadlines for applying to take the exam are typically around October 1 for the fall semester and February 15 for the spring semester, but *the decision to take the exam should be made no later than the semester prior to that in which the exam is to be taken. When students decide to take the exam, they should notify the Director of Graduate Studies in English immediately to assure that they receive all relevant communications.*

**The Reading List:** The texts are drawn from the full historical range of British and American literature, though each historical period may not be represented on every list; in addition, each list contains at least one work of world literature and one important critical or theoretical text. The list, which is different each year, is posted on the department website shortly after the previous exam is given.

**Studying for the Exam:** *The student’s preparation for the exam should begin as soon as the new list is released, and it is strongly recommended that students take no more than one—and preferably no—courses in the semester that they plan to take the exam.* Adequate knowledge of the texts on the list will involve an understanding well beyond the level of plot summary. Students are encouraged to consult with their adviser, the Director of Graduate Studies in English,and faculty specialists in the texts on the reading list, and to respond to practice questions that any of these instructors can provide. In addition to reading the required primary texts, students are encouraged to consult introductions and guides to the authors and texts in question, as well as introductions to general topics useful for the exam like literary terminology, literary theory, periodization, and formal analysis; the names of such texts may be provided as an addendum to the reading list, or may be requested by the student from the instructors mentioned above. Because the exam requires knowledge of a broad historical and generic range of texts, it is strongly advised that students planning to take the exam are particularly careful to choose, in consultation with their advisers, a range of courses designed to familiarize them with a variety of literary periods and genres.

**The Questions:** The exam consists of five questions based on the texts on the reading list. Students taking the exam answer all five questions; because the texts to be discussed are provided in advance, there is no choice of questions on the exam itself. Questions may be of several sorts, including:

* multiple-text comparison/contrast questions
* questions that require close analysis or explication of a given passage
* historically-oriented questions
* generically or formally-oriented questions
* thematically-oriented questions
* questions that require the application of critical or theoretical concepts
* questions that are combinations of the above

Typically, each exam contains a question requiring the close formal analysis of a poem, and a question requiring the application of the list’s critical or theoretical text to one or more of the other texts on the list. In addition to a thorough knowledge of the texts on the reading list, the questions assume no knowledge beyond the basic understanding of literary terminology, literary and cultural history, generic/formal classification, and critical analysis available in the course of a well-considered Planned Program supplemented as needed by consultation with the sorts of introductory texts mentioned above.

**2024-2025 English MA Comprehensive Exam List**

**Old and Middle English Literature**

* Marie de France, “Lanval”
* Geoffrey Chaucer, “The Clerk’s Tale” & “The Man of Law’s Tale” from *The Canterbury Tales* (Norton, trans. Sheila Fisher)

**Renaissance and 17th-Century English Literature**

* + William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night* (The Arden Shakespeare Third Series)
	+ John Milton, *Paradise* Lost, Books 1 & 2

**Restoration and 18th-Century English Literature**

* + Katherine Phillips, “Friendship's Mystery, to My Dearest Lucasia” & “To My Excellent Lucasia on Our Friendship”
	+ Aphra Behn, *The Rover*
	+ Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*

**19th-Century English Literature**

* + Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”
	+ John Keats, “Ode to a Nightingale” & “Ode to Autumn”
	+ Charlotte Brontë*, Jane Eyre*
	+ Oscar Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*

**American Literature before 1860**

* + Phillis Wheatley
* “To Maecenas”
* “On Imagination”
* “On Being Brought from Africa to America”
* “To the University of Cambridge in New England”
* “On the Death of Rev. Mr. George Whitefield, 1770”
* “To S.M., a Young African Painter, on Seeing His Works”
* “Niobe in Distress for Her Children Slain by Apollo, from Ovid…”
* “Hymn to Morning”
* “To His Excellency George Washington”
* “America” (unpublished)
* “On the Death of General Wooster” (unpublished)
* Letter: “Reverend and Honored Sir [to Samson Occum Feb. 11, 1774]
* Letter: “To the Right Honourable the Countess of Huntingdon” [Oct. 25. 1770]
	+ Harriot Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*
	+ Nathaniel Hawthorne, “The Birthmark” and “Young Goodman Brown”

**American Literature since 1860**

* + Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*
	+ James Baldwin, *Giovanni’s Room*
	+ Joy Harjo
* “Call It Fear”
* “The Woman Hanging From the Thirteenth Floor Window”
* “She Had Some Horses”
* “I Give You Back”
* “For Alva Benson, And For Those Who Have Learned to Speak”
* “Trickster”
* “Deer Dancer”
* “Strange Fruit”
* “Song for the Deer and Myself to Return On”
* “Day of the Dead”
* Excerpt from memoir *Poet Warrior,* pages 1-27.

**Post-1900 British & Anglophone Literature**

* + E. M. Foster, *Passage to India*
	+ Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*
	+ Patience Agbabi, “I Go Back to May 1967” and “Unfinished Business” from *Telling Tales: A Remix*

**Theory**

* + Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation--An Argument” *CR: The New Centennial Review* Vol. 3, No. 3, coloniality's persistence (fall 2003), pp. 257-337

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**Deadlines for applying to take the exam:**

• Fall Semester – October 1

• Spring Semester – February 15

Application available here: <https://tinyurl.com/42cntx39>