



Reading List Exam Guidelines
Selbststudium Leseliste
BA-Hauptfach, BA-EuLit, LS1+2

British Literary and Cultural Studies / North American Literary and Cultural Studies

Effective as of January 1, 2023

The Objectives of the Exam

The main objective of the reading list exam is to enhance your familiarity with some of the works of literature that are central to the study and understanding of the general development of British/Irish and North American (i.e., U.S. American and Canadian) literatures over time. Since, for practical reasons, it is impossible to attend to all of these texts in lectures and seminars offered in our department within a few semesters, part of this learning process needs to happen in the form of self-study, an important aspect of and addition to any university education. Your task is not only to read the texts on the reading list, but also to understand their respective significance for British/Irish or North American literary histories and cultures. You have to be able to comment on formal, structural, and rhetorical aspects of the texts (plot, rhetorical devices, prosody, etc.) as well as on main contexts. When preparing for the exam, therefore, you should of course first and foremost read the texts themselves. You should, however, also do some basic background research about the literary and cultural texts on the list. While doing all this, you should consider questions such as:

- What are the main themes and motifs of the text? Why are they important?
- Which period of North American or British/Irish literary history is this text representative of? What are the main characteristics of this period and how does the text in question reflect some or all of these characteristics? You may also find that some of the texts resist some of these characteristics.
- Which aspects of British/Irish or North American culture and history are particularly highlighted in this text, how and why? (Examples: loyalties and gender roles in the early modern age; the crisis of faith in the Victorian age; the conflicts between the UK and Ireland; the development of the American consciousness; the struggle for independence; westward expansion; slavery, abolition, and the racial strife; the colonial past and present of the U.S. and Canada; Indigenous-settler relations; the immigration question; the World Wars; the Empire; the Commonwealth etc.).
- Does this text belong to a literary/cultural movement (e.g., the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, Transcendentalism, Romanticism, Modernism, regionalism, etc.)? If so, how does it fit within this movement (or not)?
- Which genre does the text belong to (e.g., the sonnet, drama, novel, the Gothic, etc.)? What are the main characteristics of this genre as manifested in North American or British/Irish literature specifically?

The Structure of the Written Exam

The written exam, for which you will have **90 minutes**, is structured in three basic parts:

1. **Multiple choice section.** In this section you will be asked factual questions aimed at demonstrating your knowledge of the basic layout of the texts on the reading list, such as setting, events of the plot, main characters, the author of the text, its central themes, the literary period or the artistic/cultural/literary movement the text belongs to. The knowledge which is tested in this section does not require much interpretative effort from you.
2. **The short answers section.** In this section you are asked to provide short answers, about 2-4 sentences, to a question that relates to texts on the reading list. Please do write full sentences rather than mere bullet points, lists of names or themes or the like. The focus of the questions in this section will vary between factual and interpretative, but if you are asked to give an interpretative answer, the question will be brief and general, something that can be effectively answered in just a few sentences.
3. **The essay section.** In this section you are required to write a short essay. You have a choice between two different essay topics with corresponding questions. You only select *one* topic – whichever one best suits you. The two topics will be marked equally, so your choice of topic has no bearing on the outcome of your exam. Make sure to read the instructions carefully to understand the scope of the topic. Of all sections in this exam, this task requires the most interpretative effort from you. In your essay, you are expected to demonstrate not only your familiarity with the plot(s) and characters of the text, but also with its literary and cultural significance within British/Irish or North American literary history and culture. This section also gives you an opportunity for a bit of close reading. The essay questions are usually quite broad so as to give you room to utilize your knowledge. You can address themes, characters, the genre of the text and its significance, and other aspects. Of course, you will not be able to use all of your knowledge in an essay of this length. On the other hand, the essay gives you quite a lot of freedom in writing it – you can choose how you would like to approach the given question, which aspects you want to focus on in greater detail, which aspects you only mention in passing, and which ones you choose not to mention. Rather than being exhaustive, the essay should demonstrate that you are able to engage with the texts from the reading list in an informed and analytical manner, to the extent determined by the amount of time you have to address the question.

Suggestions for Preparation

When preparing for the written exam, first of all you need to read all the texts on the list and know the basic features of the biographies of their authors. Make sure to use good quality editions of the texts, specifically critical editions if available. The next step is to make sure that you can place the texts and their authors in the contexts of British/Irish or North American literary and cultural histories, i.e. connect them to relevant artistic and literary movements and historical/cultural points of reference (i.e. modernization, capitalism, the rise of the middle class, the women's movement, the civil rights movement, 9/11, etc.). This cannot be accomplished without consulting at least some elementary secondary sources in addition to reading primary texts. We recommend that you read one literary history for both British/Irish and North American literature, which will help you both to place the texts within literary periods and genres and to connect individual texts to relevant cultural processes. We specifically recommend the following books/sources for the purposes of preparation to the exam:

British/Irish Literature

- 📖 Middeke, Martin, et al., eds. *English and American Studies: Theory and Practice*. Metzler, 2012. Chapter 2 "British Literary History" (pp. 5-98) and Chapter 4 "The New Literatures in English" (pp. 163-177).
- 📖 Relevant entries of "Discovering Literature." *The British Library Website*. <https://www.bl.uk/discovering-literature>

North American Literature

- 📖 Klarer, Mario. *A Short Literary History of the United States*. Routledge, 2014.
- 📖 Middeke, Martin, et al., eds. *English and American Studies: Theory and Practice*. Metzler, 2012. Chapter 3 "American Literary History" (pp. 99-161) and Chapter 4 "The New Literatures in English" for information on Canada (pp. 163-177).

Concerning general information about authors and texts, the introductions and commentaries of good quality critical anthologies are helpful (which, of course, also offer edited

versions of a number of the texts on the list). The two most popular are *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* and *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*.

Content Warning

Please be advised that some of the texts on the reading list deal with sensitive content such as sexual, racialized, and colonial violence. If you feel you are unable to engage with a particular text on the reading list for personal reasons, please get in touch with a student advisor of your choice well in advance of the exam for a consultation. We will do our best to find a solution for you; the reduction of the amount of reading, however, is not possible.

Student advisors

Dr. Arlette Warken: a.warken@mx.uni-saarland.de

Dr. Heike Mißler: h.missler@mx.uni-saarland.de