

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE CONCENTRATION

SENIOR THESIS HANDBOOK



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CompLit

Harvard University
Department of
Comparative Literature

Fall, 2026

Dear Seniors,

It is with great delight that I welcome you to your senior year in Comparative Literature. May your last year at Harvard be exciting and inspiring and full of stirring adventures, both personal and academic.

The senior thesis should be a central element in this adventure, and the material contained in this Handbook is intended to facilitate the thesis writing process. It includes a thesis calendar that lists all relevant thesis-related dates. There are guidelines that address practical and logistical issues, as well as important information on writing the thesis proposal and selected sample thesis proposals. Note “How to Write a Good Research Proposal,” “Twenty Tips for Writing the Senior Thesis,” and the useful suggestions from the Academic Resource Center, which are especially helpful resources in the early stages of thesis formulation. Please read all of this material carefully. You will find it both useful and reassuring.

The early days of the semester are inevitably very full, and the prospect of the senior thesis can seem daunting. You have multiple advising resources to draw on. **Your tutor is a primary and invaluable resource and serves as your academic advisor as well.** You should schedule a meeting with them early in the first week of the semester **and plan to meet with them on a scheduled weekly basis thereafter for at least 75-90 minutes each time.** These weekly meetings are critical to making meaningful and sustained progress on your thesis and should be prioritized as such. They provide an opportunity for you to work closely with your tutor to refine the scope, focus, and structure of your thesis project and to develop and clarify your central argument. Equally important, they function as collaborative working sessions that support the intellectual and methodological development of your project.

Your **faculty mentor** can also be a terrific source of information and support, and we encourage you to meet with them as often as your schedule allows throughout the year. At a minimum, we require **four meetings** between you and your mentor: The first should take place in early September and should bring together you, your tutor, and your mentor to discuss your thesis project and proposal. Three subsequent meetings between you and your mentor should follow the submission of the three chapters to discuss feedback and progress and ideally should include your tutor as well. In return, your mentor will serve as a member of the committee that reviews your thesis proposal and will read and comment either orally or in writing on your three required written submissions. **You are responsible for scheduling all meetings. Please give your mentor enough time and advance notice to accommodate your meeting request.**

We will continue our **required tutorial workshops** with a senior series that focuses particularly on upcoming assignments and elements that are fundamental to your senior tutorial —thesis research, proposal writing, writing strategies, and more. Jacob Meister will lead the workshops, and the dates and times are included in the Senior Tutorial Timetable below. **Make a note of them in your calendar now. All workshops will meet on Wednesdays, from 6-8pm in the Dana-Palmer Seminar Room. Please do not schedule any other obligations, academic or**

extra-curricular, during this time. Attendance at the workshops is mandatory and a priority commitment. Failure to attend may result in a grade of UNSAT for tutorial.

Finally, we will celebrate your thesis work at the **Senior Thesis Panel on April 7 at 7pm** in the Thompson Room where each of you will give a brief presentation of your thesis project. More information about this event will be given closer to the date. For now, **please mark this important occasion in your calendar.**

Needless to say, you should not hesitate to check in with me about any concerns or ideas you might have about the senior thesis, or, for that matter, any aspect of the upcoming year. I plan to meet with each of you individually in the course of the semester to review your program of study and to discuss your Comp Lit experience, but you need not wait for that meeting to get in touch. I am very eager to see you all again.

With my warmest wishes for a fulfilling and productive year,

Sandra Naddaff

Senior Lecturer, Director of Undergraduate Studies, Comparative Literature
Dean, Harvard Summer School

SENIOR TUTORIAL TIMETABLE 2026-2027

Date	FALL 2026
Sept. 2	Fall Term Begins
Sept. 2-23	Meet with Mentor to discuss thesis work and proposal
Sept. 9	Senior Tutorial Workshop: Writing Your Thesis Proposal, 6-8pm
Sept. 17	Draft of Thesis Proposal due to Tutor and Mentor
Sept. 24	Final Thesis Proposal due to Department by 2pm
Sept. 30	Sr. Tut. Workshop: Navigating Library Resources & Developing Research Skills, 6-8pm
Oct. 14	Senior Tutorial Workshop: Chapter One Workshop, 6-8pm
Oct. 29	1st Chapter of Thesis due to tutor and to Department by 2pm
Nov. 2-6	Meet with Mentor to discuss 1st Thesis Chapter
Nov. 4-18	Spring Courses Registration
Nov. 18	Senior Tutorial Workshop: How to Write Over Winter Break, 6-8pm
Nov 25-29	<i>Thanksgiving Break</i>
Dec. 3	2nd Chapter of Thesis due to tutor and to Department by 2pm
Dec. 4	Last day of Fall Term Classes
Dec. 5-9	Fall Reading Period
Dec. 7-18	Meet with Mentor to discuss 2nd Thesis Chapter
Dec. 10-19	Fall Exam Period
Dec 20-Jan 24	<i>Winter Recess/Winter Break</i>
Date	SPRING 2026
January 25	Spring Term Begins
February 11	3rd Thesis Chapter due to tutor and to Department by 2pm
Feb. 15-19	Meet with Mentor to discuss remaining thesis work
February 17	Senior Tutorial Workshop: Introductions, Conclusions, and Abstracts 6-8pm
February 25	Thesis Title and Abstract due to Department
February 26	Full Thesis Draft due to Tutor
March 12	Thesis due to Department by 2pm
March 13-21	<i>Spring Break</i>
Mar 22-May 2	Orals Preparation
Mar 24	Senior Tutorial Workshop: Prepping for the Oral Exam, 6-8pm
April 7	Senior Thesis Panel, 7pm
April 15	Orals List Draft due to Tutor
April 22	Final Orals List due to Dpt.
April 26	Orals Essay due to Dpt. by 2pm
April 28	Last day of Spring Term Classes
May 3-5	Senior Oral Exams
May 26	Comp Lit Graduation Reception 11am-12pm
May 27	Commencement

COMP LIT SENIOR TUTORIAL WORKSHOPS

FALL 2026 & SPRING 2027

DANA-PALMER SEMINAR ROOM

With Jacob Meister

FALL 2026

Writing Your Thesis Proposal (Wednesday, September 9, 6-8PM)

How to write a senior thesis proposal? To explore the process and to prepare for your upcoming deadline, we will study the genre by reading and dissecting proposals from previous years. Attention will also be paid to creating an annotated bibliography. In the second half of the workshop, you will draft an outline and first paragraph of the proposal, a revision of which will be shared for peer review on our discussion board.

Navigating Library Resources & Developing Research Skills (Wednesday, September 30, 6-8PM)

How to begin the daunting task of researching a thesis? How to find what you're looking for? How to work with primary and secondary sources? Dr. Rita Soenksen, Research and Pedagogy Librarian and Departmental Liaison, will join us for this workshop, designed to guide you through the craft of research as you begin to write the first chapter.

Chapter One Workshop (Wednesday, October 14, 6-8PM)

To prepare for your upcoming deadline, you will submit a draft abstract, outline, and one-page introduction of your first chapter to our discussion board one week prior to our meeting. Having read through everyone's materials, you will choose the work of one peer and respond with questions and suggestions. In the workshop, you will present a brief synthesis of your argument in a short informal talk, followed by Q&A.

How to Write Over Winter Break (Wednesday, November 18, 6-8PM)

How to avoid feeling lost and indulging in procrastination after the semester ends? As a check-in just before Thanksgiving, this workshop will offer strategies on how to get writing done during winter break, including forming Zoom writing groups in December and January, when many students will be off campus.

SPRING 2027

Introductions, Conclusions, and Abstracts (Wednesday, February 17, 6-8PM)

By now you've written your last chapter. The full draft of your thesis is due soon to your tutor. What's left? The introduction, conclusion, and thesis abstract. This workshop will look at successful examples of each as we think about how to open and close a thesis. You will then draft the first page of your introduction and a thesis abstract, a revision of both will be shared for peer review on our discussion board.

Prepping for the Oral Exam (Wednesday, March 24, 6-8PM)

In preparation for oral exams at the end of the semester, which require a pivot from written to oral expression, this workshop will offer you the chance to practice speaking about your completed work. To simulate the exam experience, you will give a précis aimed at synthesizing your thesis for listeners both familiar and unfamiliar with the work, followed by Q&A.

SENIOR THESIS GUIDELINES

The following guidelines address some of the basic questions regarding the more practical dimensions of the senior thesis project. In general, however, we recommend that you consult the most recent edition of either the Modern Language Association's *Style Manual* or the University of Chicago's *A Manual of Style* for full information regarding the mechanical aspects of the thesis.

THESIS PROPOSAL:

A final description of the thesis project should be submitted to the undergraduate Comp Lit office by the deadline indicated on the timetable above. The proposal should consist of a full description of the project and include an annotated bibliography. It should be drawn up in full consultation with the thesis advisor and the faculty mentor. It will then be reviewed by a sub-committee that is headed by your senior tutor and includes your faculty mentor and one member of the Tutorial Board. For more information on the thesis proposal process as well as sample thesis proposals, please consult the "The Senior Thesis Proposal" memo and thesis proposals below.

THESIS DUE DATE:

The thesis is due by **2:00 pm on the date indicated in the timetable above. THIS IS A FIRM DEADLINE. A late thesis will not be accepted.** Extensions will be considered only in the case of exceptional circumstances, such as prolonged illness or family emergency, upon application to the Director of Undergraduate Studies.

LENGTH:

The thesis should be no less than 11,250 words and no more than 18,750 words (~45-75 pages). This does not include footnotes, endnotes, bibliography, appendices, or other critical or creative apparatus. Any student who anticipates exceeding this limit must petition the DUS at least two weeks in advance of the due date for an exception. Please note that a reader may penalize a thesis that is over the limit, even if an exception has been granted, if the excessive length is deemed unnecessary.

HONOR CODE AFFIRMATION:

Students must append an acknowledgement of the Harvard College Honor Code to the page following the thesis title page. The statement should read: "I affirm my awareness of the standards of the Harvard College Honor Code."

TRANSLATION THESIS:

Specific information on the translation thesis is included below.

ORIGINAL CREATIVE MATERIAL:

Specific information on incorporating original creative material is included below.

QUOTATIONS:

Quotations of four lines or less should be surrounded by quotation marks and incorporated into the text. Longer quotations should be set off from the text, indented, and single-spaced, and should not be set off in quotation marks. All direct quotations from a foreign language, whether a single word, a short phrase or a longer excerpt, should be given in the original and accompanied by a translation. We generally recommend that a student include translations of brief passages (single words or short phrases) in the body of the text, while translations of longer passages should generally be included in the footnotes/endnotes. In any case, a student should be consistent in their translation practices. Translations may either be from a published source or may be the student's own. Non-Romanized alphabets may be transliterated for quotation purposes when necessary.

**FOOTNOTES/
ENDNOTES:**

Either footnotes or endnotes may be used. Consult either the *Chicago Manual of Style* or the *MLA Style Manual* for proper formatting.

In general, notes should contain supplementary textual commentary/ information or reference information. For further remarks regarding note logic and format, consult the sources above.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

A list of works cited and works consulted should be appended to the Senior Thesis. Again, refer to the above sources for the proper

APPENDICES:

Any longer supplementary material that is considered useful for understanding the thesis but is not part of the actual analysis or exposition may be included in an appendix. Such material may include an original text under consideration if not readily available, illustrations or similar visual material, original creative work that supplements the analysis at hand, etc. Material included in the appendix is not included in the final word count of the thesis.

TITLE PAGE:

See Section VI for an example of the proper format of the thesis title page.

FINAL COPY:

A clean final presentation of the thesis is very important, and a student should not underestimate the time necessary to prepare the final copy. The thesis should be error-free; all accent marks should be included in quotations in foreign languages; and both footnotes/endnotes and bibliography should be complete and correct. All pages should be numbered, and each thesis should include a table of contents.

Students should submit one single PDF document of their thesis by the official deadline to Isaure Mignotte (mignotte@fas).

JOINT CONCENTRATORS: Students in **Joint Concentrations** should follow the policies and deadlines of their primary concentration for all matters pertaining to the senior thesis. You should submit one copy of the thesis to Comp Lit and a copy to their other concentration, regardless of which concentration is primary. A joint thesis is ordinarily evaluated by one faculty member in each department.

THESIS EVALUATIONS: Each thesis will be reviewed by two readers. In cases where two widely divergent readings are submitted, a third reader will be asked to evaluate the thesis as well. A joint thesis is ordinarily evaluated by one faculty member in each department, as noted above.

Students are encouraged to meet with their readers to discuss the comments. Any thesis that receives a grade of MAGNA or above will be sent to the University Archives. The final thesis grade is an average of the two (or exceptionally three) thesis rankings. This grade is factored into the final departmental degree recommendation.

THE TRANSLATION THESIS

The undergraduate Comp Lit program allows students to undertake a translation as their senior thesis project. In general, a translation thesis is comprised of a translation of a text that may or may not have been translated previously, as well as a significant critical commentary on the work in the form of a translator's preface/critical commentary and notes on the text. **Students who wish to undertake a translation thesis are strongly encouraged to have the appropriate background in translation and translation studies, either through their academic work, an internship, or engaged scholarship, and should consult with the Director of Undergraduate Studies before launching the thesis work.**

The following guidelines provide valuable information on the form and content of a translation thesis:

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| FORMAT: | One clear copy of the original text must be provided as an attachment along with the thesis submission. For other formatting indications, refer to the general thesis guidelines. |
| LENGTH OF
TRANSLATED TEXT: | The translation itself should be between 15,000 and 22,500 words, or about 60-90 double-spaced pages. Texts that fit this format well include novellas, plays, collections of short stories or poems, and some critical essays. A student who wishes to translate from a longer work (such as a novel) should choose a representative excerpt or a collection of excerpts that functions well as a standalone text. |
| TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE: | <p>The translator's preface/critical commentary is an essential component of the translation thesis. It should be no less than 5,000 and no more than 7,500 words, or about 20-30 double-spaced pages. The preface should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce the text to a general academic readership and explain its significance. Relevant information about the author and the composition or reception of the text may be provided. If English translations of the text already exist, the preface should situate the new translation in relation to existing ones and explain what the new translation seeks to achieve. • Detail the translation challenges posed by the text. Using well-chosen examples, the stylistic particularities and semantic richness of the original text should be highlighted, demonstrating an informed understanding of the text in the original language. |

- Describe and justify the translation strategies chosen in order to best render the original text. It may be useful to refer to other translations used as models (or counter-models), or to relevant texts on translation theory.

FOOTNOTES/ ENDNOTES: Footnotes or endnotes should highlight within the translation places where a difficulty presented itself (such as word play, semantic ambiguities, or terms with no English equivalent) and explain how that difficulty was handled. In the case of a recurring difficulty, a note at the first occurrence is sufficient. A translation should not be overloaded with notes: in some cases, it may be advisable to limit notes to representative or significant instances. Important or recurrent difficulties can be addressed at greater length in the translator's preface.

Notes can also be used to provide information about cultural or historical background relevant to an understanding of specific elements in the text.

THESIS EVALUATIONS: Translation theses will be evaluated by two readers, at least one of whom will have a knowledge of the original language. In addition to the accuracy and readability of the translation, evaluators will devote particular attention to the quality of the critical apparatus (preface and notes).

INCORPORATING CREATIVE MATERIAL INTO THE SENIOR THESIS

The undergraduate Comp Lit program supports the inclusion of original creative material into a critical thesis, although we do not accept stand-alone creative projects such as a collection of poems, a dramatic production, an installation, or a musical composition as a complete senior thesis.

Some past examples of how creative material has been incorporated into a senior thesis in Comp Lit are:

- The conclusion to a thesis on the graphic novel *Persepolis* that was written in the style and format of a graphic novel.
- A live musical performance and recording of various compositions based on the figure of Mignon in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* in a thesis that analyzes both the literary and the musical representations of the character.
- The inclusion of a video documenting a musical performance in a thesis on performance in both verbal and musical media.
- An original non-fiction personal essay on cheerleading camp in a thesis on the creative non-fiction writing of David Foster Wallace.
- An installation that uses video and sculpture to meditate on how individuals enter virtual space. The critical component of this thesis (a joint project for Comp Lit and AFVS) examines the theoretical premises of this topic.

Each of these examples offers a different way of including the creative material into the thesis: as a chapter in the thesis itself, as an appendix, or as extra-documentary material. **You should discuss carefully how you plan to use your creative material with your thesis advisor and with the Director of Undergraduate Studies well in advance of submitting your thesis in order to avoid any unanticipated complications. You should also make sure that you have the appropriate background in your creative enterprise, whether through a course, a workshop, or engaged scholarship. All creative material should add value to the thesis itself and should be undertaken thoughtfully and carefully.**

FORMAT:

If the creative work is non-verbal in nature, it must be included with the thesis submission. If the work involves a performance or an exhibition, the student should inform the department of the dates and location well in advance so that the readers can attend.

LENGTH OF CREATIVE MATERIAL:

If the creative material is part of the thesis itself, it should be included as part of the thesis word count. Material that is included in an appendix or is included in another medium is considered outside of the word count tally.

THESIS EVALUATIONS:

The thesis readers will consider all creative material as an integral part of the senior thesis as a whole. The final evaluation of the thesis will consider the creative material on its own terms as well

as the way it contributes to the overall argument and analysis of the topic at hand. Every effort will be made to find at least one reader who is knowledgeable about the relevant medium or art form.

SAMPLE TITLE PAGE FOR SENIOR THESIS:

**“over there is over here”:
Politics, Gender, and Authority in Contemporary Arabic and English Performance Poetry**

By

Cassandra Euphrat-Weston

Presented to the
Undergraduate Comparative Literature Concentration
in the Department of Comparative Literature
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Honors

Harvard College
Cambridge, Massachusetts

March 12, 2027

THE SENIOR THESIS PROPOSAL

Writing the senior thesis proposal is the first step in formulating your senior thesis project. The proposal should define carefully the parameters of your field of exploration and inquiry and should consist of three parts: 1) a **tentative thesis title**; 2) a prose description of approximately **800-1000 words** outlining your proposed topic and following the guidelines in this document; and 3) an **annotated bibliography** listing at least five secondary works that are related to your topic. The proposal due date is indicated on the timetable above.

READ AND REFLECT: It can be difficult at the outset to decide the focus of your thesis work, so take plenty of time in the early days to think about what interests you most. It's often useful to start by reflecting on past projects and papers. **What works have you found most provocative over the past three years? Which courses have served as your intellectual touchstones?** This kind of reflection can be helped enormously by reading widely in both primary and secondary literature as you are trying to formulate your topic. Re-read works you already know well; read the books that you've been meaning to read for years but haven't, if they tie into your field of interest. Look back at critical and theoretical texts that have opened up new fields of inquiry for you, paying special attention to the introductory chapters and the way the problem is formulated. Finally, talk at length to your tutor or any other member of the faculty or Tutorial Board about your interests and ideas. Use them to help you formulate your thoughts, define an area of study, and determine interesting texts to consider for your project.

ASK A QUESTION: What is the central question or related set of questions that animates your thesis project? One of the most productive ways to formulate a thesis proposal and project is to ask a question and then attempt to answer it, e.g.: What does it mean to write in a new or revived or "minor" language? How do we define authorship and how is that definition altered by new media? How do we define a refugee narrative and what is its relationship to current governmental policies on immigration? Tease out the various implications and ramifications of the question. Try it out on different texts. Don't feel that you need to know the answer to the question or even have a working hypothesis at the outset of the project. But make sure that you find the question compelling, and that it is rich and provocative enough to sustain you through seven months of reading, thinking, and writing.

BE SPECIFIC: Your proposal should specify the works you intend to examine in your thesis. There is no set or recommended limit to the number of works to analyze and there is no one kind of work to investigate. Some theses have focused primarily on theoretical texts, others on primary works of fiction or poetry, still others on works drawn from different media. The important thing to remember is that you should engage your works carefully as a means of answering the questions you have asked.

You are strongly encouraged to engage with works drawn from multiple languages, literary traditions, and cultural contexts and to situate your work within a broader comparative context. If you are drawing on works from a single language, you should explain what makes the project comparative. In either case you should define the larger problem, question, or theoretical issue your thesis confronts by way of highlighting its comparative dimension. What assumptions, categories, or scholarly methods does it test, complicate, or revise? How do your chosen works illuminate each other? What larger intellectual stakes emerge from reading them together?

You should outline the structure of your thesis in your proposal: How many chapters do you anticipate? What will each chapter address? Do you expect to include an appendix or other textual material that is not a part of the thesis itself (e.g., the original text of a work you are translating)? Will your thesis contain external material (e.g., a video, a recording, a website)? This structure will change as your project develops, but it is very helpful to think early on about the shape of your work.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: In addition to specifying those texts to be examined in the body of your proposal, you should append an annotated bibliography of at least five critical or theoretical works that pertain to your proposed topic. You should have read these works **before** submitting your proposal, and in addition to giving the conventional bibliographic information, you should write three or four lines outlining the subject matter of the book, making its relation to your thesis topic clear. Keep in mind that your final thesis project will include a lengthier bibliography indicating works cited and consulted in the course of your research.

CREATIVE COMPONENTS IN THE CRITICAL THESIS: See the section entitled “Creative Material” above for information on incorporating creative material into the senior thesis.

THE TRANSLATION THESIS: See the section entitled “The Translation Thesis” above for information on the translation thesis.

PROPOSAL PRESENTATION: Your proposal needs to include the Thesis Proposal Cover page shown below. Students should email their entire proposal in a single document to the Undergraduate Office by the specified deadline. Your tutor must also send a separate acknowledgment to indicate approval to the Undergraduate Program Coordinator. The proposal itself and the annotated bibliography should be included with this form.

PROPOSAL FEEDBACK: A small sub-committee, headed by your senior tutor and including your faculty mentor and one member of the Tutorial Board, will review the individual proposal for content, argumentation, bibliography, etc. and will offer ideas for further development as necessary. Your tutor will arrange a meeting that includes the student and the sub-committee to discuss proposal feedback. Occasionally, a student will be asked to rewrite the proposal and resubmit it.

SENIOR THESIS PROPOSAL**NAME:**

TUTOR:

MENTOR:

JUNIOR ESSAY TITLE:

LANGUAGES USED IN THESIS WORK AND RESEARCH:

TENTATIVE THESIS TITLE:

In 800-1000 words, describe your senior thesis project. **Please consult the information included above in “Senior Thesis Proposal” for guidance on what to include in your proposal.** Remember to include an **annotated bibliography** of at least 5 secondary sources as part of your proposal.

Email your entire proposal in a single Word file or PDF to Isaure Mignotte at (mignotte@fas.harvard.edu) by the specified deadline. Your tutor must also send a separate acknowledgment to indicate approval to Isaure Mignotte.

THESIS

PROPOSAL SAMPLES

THE PROPOSALS BELOW ARE EXCERPTS.
FOR THE FULL PROPOSAL, CLICK ON THE LINK IN THE TITLE.

Borges and Perón: The Cultural Battle for the Argentine

(Joint with History, Allied)

Juan Domingo Perón was elected as president of Argentina in 1946, prompting varied reactions throughout the country ranging from pure elation to fearful disgust. In the years that Perón served his first and second terms in office, Jorge Luis Borges enjoyed his most prolific years as a celebrated writer, producing many works that would become heralded in Argentina and worldwide. In these two men, we find the representation of two complex discursive fields in Argentina that continue to have great relevance. Though viewing these men in parallel has not been attempted in historiography or literary analysis, I argue that due to important parallels in their discourse and the active conflict that their discursive fields posed to each other throughout the twentieth century, the changes their ideas created in Argentina can be more productively understood if we put them in conversation. How did Borges's and Perón's ideas contribute to the conflict of cultural discourse in Argentina throughout the twentieth century? How do they, or the camps they represent, each act as context for the other's unique rhetorical project, and how does this resultantly affect each project? Broadly, to what extent can we read literature politically and politics as literature?

In such an undertaking, my situation at the crossroads of Comparative Literature and History will allow me to combine close literary analysis with historical research in order to read history through literature and vice versa. The comparativism comes not from a transnational or multilingual perspective, but from investigating the competing fields of literature and politics. This tension serves one of my initial motivations for this project – how can we thoughtfully interpret literature and politics in tandem, despite their decisive differences? The primary sources I will study include news sources (like literary magazines and daily newspapers), Borges' stories and essays, and Perón's letters and speeches. My main analysis will stem from close reading of all of these sources in conversation.

[...]

Use of Myth in Vergil's and Goethe's Helen

Today, the word *myth* always means a certain kind of ancient story that we presume should not be believed. The modern word is a direct transliteration of the ancient Greek μῦθος, which, at its most basic, has the much simpler meaning of *speech*. Poets who seek to tell of these tales once again must confront this word in both senses: on the one hand, the myth as canon whose fame is the very thing that drives the poet to his task; and on the other, the myth as speech, words that have been handed down over the generations, told in different ways, and which the poet himself prepares to tell again.

Vergil and Goethe were both poets who took up the telling of the myth of Helen of Troy in their *magna opera*, the *Aeneid* and the *Faust*, respectively. Both devoted significant time to telling parts of the Trojan myth again, yet also incorporated this Trojan myth with other myths to form their own highly original wholes. Both also were writing in times not only when a huge body of the mythic tradition was available to them, but also when a startling amount of energy and myriad approaches were being applied to mythology as a discipline. Given these similarities, I propose a comparison of the way that Vergil and Goethe use the myth of Troy in their works for the main subject of my thesis.

I propose each author's telling of Helen as the focal point of the comparison. Both works contain scenes of Helen that at once rely heavily upon and fit naturally within the recorded mythic tradition-- Homer, the Epic Cycle, Euripides, among many others; yet both write for themselves scenes that are not exactly found in any of these major works. Both authors' Helen scenes are also passages that are critical points in the original whole of both works.

[...]

The *Pessoptimist* Goes on Trial: A Literary-Legal History of the Habibi Defamation Case

(Joint with NELC, Allied)

My thesis will revolve around a 1988 defamation suit the Palestinian novelist Emil Habibi brought against the editors of *Al-Şināra* magazine. The trial concerned a political dispute that had been playing out for years, in fits and starts, across the pages of *Al-Şināra* and other Arabophone papers. Critics accused Habibi of collaborating with the Israeli state. Their central piece of evidence was a work of fiction: Habibi's 1974 novel, *The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist*, whose picaresque hero Saeed becomes a collaborator for the Israeli state. The author's opponents alleged the book was autobiographical, a thinly veiled confession. My project will re-examine the trial within the framework of literary rather than legal study, combining historical research on the case with close reading of the novel and other works of literature, philosophy, and theory.

My argument will concern the issue of subpoena power over the novel — not literally, in a court of law, but figuratively, in the context of aesthetic interpretation. *Can we expect the novel (or novelist) to communicate a stable, articulable message?* I will not investigate the moral conundrum of admitting art as legal evidence, though that remains a live matter.¹ Instead, I will focus on the implications for literary theory and criticism. On a deeper level, the thesis asks: *what does it mean to take the novel seriously?*

I will outline two divergent visions of the "serious reader." (These distillations are ideal types; real interpreters fall somewhere in-between.) First, the serious reader can attempt to extract a coherent ethical message from the text. By "ethical," I mean, expressing normative judgements about righteous human action, according to a particular set of ultimate values: honor and loyalty, or ingenuity and pragmatism, or mercy and charity, etc.

[...]

Without Consolation: Narrative

“When readers are confronted with potentially unreadable narratives, texts that are radically inconsistent,” writes Monica Fludernik in her 1996 *Toward a Natural Narratology*, “they cast about for ways and means of recuperating these texts as narratives.” What, then, does it mean for a text to be potentially unreadable? Or for the reader to attempt these acts of recuperation?

In my thesis, I aim to develop a theory of narrative interpretation in the writerly novel, wherein systems of interpretation destabilize the processes of interpretation and meaning-making both within the novel’s content and through the novel’s form.

My thesis will rely primarily on two texts: Dovid Bergelson’s 1920 Yiddish-language novel *Opgang* [Descent] and Djuna Barnes’ 1936 *Nightwood*. These works are marked by their distinctly modernist fragmentation of narrative and their obscure, atemporal configuration. They are works which refuse catharsis: as Jeanette Winterson writes of *Nightwood* in her 2006 preface to the novel, it is “demanding...there is no consolation.”

Nightwood and *Opgang* both center around the critical absence of key characters—namely, Robin and Meylekh—and the attempts of other characters to interpret through and around this absence. I propose that these attempts at interpersonal interpretation map onto acts of artistic interpretation: that Robin and Meylekh act as resistant writerly texts that expose other character’s struggles to interpret, narrativize, and make meaning from these absent figures. Meanwhile, the narratives present that same difficulty themselves as texts, perpetrating acts of narrative refusal and subversion that challenge readerly expectation; force the reader to perform interpretive acts while simultaneously interrogating the nature of those same acts. In doing so, *Nightwood* and *Opgang* push back against pre-modernist stories of linear progress. Here, there can be no relief: there is no conclusion, no progress made.

[...]

Heroes, Monsters, and Nihilists: Portrayals of Masculine Identities in Contemporary Apocalypse Film and Literature

The tagline of Roland Emmerich's 2009 American apocalyptic disaster film, *2012*, was the ominous statement: "We were warned." As we continue to experience a pandemic that has claimed over six million lives and head towards an ever-bleaker environmental future, this tagline seems oddly apt to describe our 21st century existence. We *were* warned - by scientists, by activists, and by artists, the latter of which have often used the apocalypse and post-apocalypse genres. Apocalyptic fiction, as I define it, ponders the potential demise and renewal of global, national, or even personal worlds, and consequently engages deeply with current social structures of authority. I pose that one of the most central of these constructions is that of gender; in particular, masculinity.

To date, there has not been enough attention given to the fabrication of masculine identities within the apocalypse genre. In particular, there is a need for more detailed scrutiny of the ways in which dominant trends, such as the male hero or the tyrant, have been altered by singular works. I posit that the characterization of masculinity is often *the* central factor behind the work's overall tone; specifically, whether the relevant apocalypse-scape is intended to be consumed as a utopia or dystopia. A conventional understanding would imply that most apocalyptic worlds are steeped in the grammar of dystopia, extinction, and demise. But when inspecting the manifestations of male identity within these texts, I find that they are often explorative, rather than merely pessimistic, planes of modern gender politics. Therefore, in this project, I hope to argue that the consideration of manhood is one of the driving forces behind the question of apocalypse as either catastrophic hellscape or utopic fantasy; in this way, each text's imagination of masculinity is the essence of its overall philosophy.

[...]

Translating Marie-Hélène Lafon's *Les Sources*:
At the Crossroads Between Literary Tradition Inherited from 18th Century
'Réalisme' and Social Depiction of Contemporary "Transfuges Sociaux"

Marie-Hélène Lafon has proven to be a difficult author for French literary circles to categorize. Although heavily inspired by Flaubert's style and realism, she has not remained entirely 'loyal' to this literary tradition since her subject matter often revolves around social depiction and addressing the social issues faced by the agricultural world in France. When asked about betrayal and the prevalence of social 'embarrassment' (*honte sociale*) in her work and her life during an interview, Marie-Hélène Lafon answered as follows:

I try to make it a dynamic concept rather than a definite and sterile overwhelming thought. Besides, we are always a traitor in someone's eyes. I have the background to have been enrolled among the "transfuges sociaux" writers, much more pugnacious than I, such as Edouard Louis or Annie Ernaux. However, my career took me down other paths. In the game of life, I did not stop at the 'social embarrassment' square. Annie Ernaux, as she beautifully writes, did.¹

For my thesis, I plan on translating French author Marie-Hélène Lafon's latest novel, *Les Sources* (2023), and accompanying it with a Translator's Preface and an analytical Introduction. Drawing upon the novel's topic of domestic abuse and women's emancipation in an agricultural setting, I hope to analyze how Lafon positions herself at the crossroads between 18th century 'réalisme' and contemporary 'transfuges sociaux.'

Marie-Hélène Lafon is a French writer, whose works have mostly centered around the experience of rural France, its confrontation with the urban world, and emancipation through education. Originating from an agricultural family in the Cantal region of France, she studied in Paris and eventually became a Classics professor. Author of over 20 novels and winner of France's most prestigious prizes (Renaudot, Goncourt), Lafon has however not gained recognition abroad and has very rarely translated up till now. As of now, none of her works have been translated into English.

Les Sources is Lafon's latest work, which describes four days in the life of an agricultural family

¹ « J'essaye d'en faire un principe dynamique plutôt qu'un vertige définitif et stérile. On est d'ailleurs toujours le traître de quelqu'un. J'ai le profil pour être enrôlée parmi les écrivains «transfuges sociaux», beaucoup plus pugnaces que moi, comme Edouard Louis ou Annie Ernaux. Or mon parcours a suivi d'autres chemins. Au jeu de l'oie, je ne me suis pas arrêtée sur la case «honte sociale». Annie Ernaux, comme elle l'écrit magnifiquement, oui. », see Koutchoumoff Arman, Lisbeth, « Marie-Hélène Lafon : J'avais l'orgueil et j'avais la rage », [Le Temps](#)

living in a situation of abuse and isolation, set in her native Cantal region. The novel spans across three timelines and is narrated from three points of view: first the unnamed abused woman (in 1967), then her abuser husband Pierre (1974), and finally their daughter Claire (2021). As with all of Lafon's novels, *Les Sources* was published by Buchet-Chastel, a small publisher with a catalog of about 50 books per year. It seems that her more recent novels have been more demanded for translations, given that *Les Sources* has already been translated into Dutch and Swedish, and that the rights have been sold to translate into German, Italian, Polish, Spanish, Catalan and Danish.

[...]

How to Write a Good Research Proposal

Dennis Yi Tenen

Associate Professor of English and Comparative Literature, Columbia University

Many research proposals I read begin with a set of propositions or a thesis. But don't you find it strange to offer conclusions *before* the actual work of collecting, organizing, and synthesizing the material? To my mind, it makes more sense to think about a proposal as *a plan for research*--a document that poses questions, rather than answering them. To these ends, I suggest your proposal contain a concise treatment of the following questions (in any order):

- *What has prompted your interest in the topic?*
The purpose of the first paragraph is to ease your audience into the field of your research. A small case-study, a quotation, or an anecdote can be used to create a reader-friendly "point-of-departure," which introduces the reader to the range of questions that motivate your work.
- *What kinds of questions will you be asking?*
What is your **problematic**? What philosophical, literary, social, ideological, or historical problems will your work engage? What kinds of questions do *not* interest you? What categories of thought and critical assumptions involved?
- *How do your questions fit into a broader intellectual tradition?*
What is the **tradition** of answering these types of questions? Where do you expect to continue or break with the tradition?
- *How will you answer your questions?*
What are your **methods**? Close reading? Distant reading? Interviews? Archival research? Text analysis? Be practical and specific here.
- *Where will you look for your answers?*
Create a sense of your **archive**. What kind of materials will you be looking for (literary, legal, scientific)? What period? What language? What medium? What genre? Where is it located? How will you get to it and when? This could be as simple as "Ulysses, by James Joyce," the graphic novel collection at Butler Library, or as complicated as "Comparative traditions of Medieval Slavonic hagiography." What are the biases implicit in your archive or dataset? What kind of things are included or excluded?
- *What kind of answers do you anticipate?*
What do you **expect** this material to tell you? What possible problems (theoretical, practical, or otherwise) could stand in the way of your analysis?
- *How might you structure your writing?*
What form do you expect your thesis to take? What sections or subsections will be helpful in organizing your materials and your argument? Do you need to include some cultural or historical context? Make a diagram on a whiteboard, take a picture, and include it in your proposal. Write a section-by-section **outline**.
- *A plan of action*
Identify any gaps you have. Describe work completed (if any). Come up with a reasonable **schedule**. Suggest per-week, per-month, per-semester goals and milestones.

TWENTY TIPS FOR SENIOR THESIS WRITERS

(and other writers, too)

by Sheila M. Reindl, Ed.D.

ACADEMIC RESOURCE CENTER SENIOR THESIS TIPS