

Sample One

Name, date, email, and director if one has been found. You do not need to have a director before you write your prospectus, but it is preferable that you have one.

Tentative title: "Native American Poets and Modern Poetry"

I propose to read the work of three Native American poets through this idea of mediation and two cultures. Many modern Native American poets use their writing to portray reservation life, but their poetry can also act as a means of expressing the interaction between reservation life and a dominant American culture. I will try to show how the poets adapt images from the dominant Western culture and portray them in a different context in order to provide a new voice for their experience of living on reservations. I am especially interested in how the poets use a range of images, from contemporary popular media culture to older historical references such as the captivity narrative of Mary Rowlandson. What is the effect of such images on the poems themselves, and what is their effect on the construction of a Native American tradition of poetry in the US?

I plan to do a series of interconnected close readings of the poems of Alexie, Louis, and Erdrich. In the section on Alexie, I anticipate focusing most of my attention on the poems in Alexie's 1993 collection The First Indian on the Moon, but I also plan to consult a wider range of his work, including The Summer of Black Widows (1996) and The Business of Fancydancing (1992). In the sections on Louis and Erdrich, I plan to work with Fire Water World and Jacklight respectively, although part of my research plan involves seeking out interviews and essays from all three poets. I am supposing that such extra-poetic sources will show that the poets are all imagining a Native American tradition of poetry, and that I will then be able to produce a richer version of what that poetic tradition is and does in U.S. culture. In addition to consulting the primary sources I have just listed, I plan to consult a number of recent critical books on Native American literature. I will also examine recent critical writing about each of the poets I discuss in selected journals like *Contemporary Literature*. A number of journals have recently had special issues on Native American writing, and I hope to find material that relates to my social and historical analysis.

Sample Two

Name, date, email, name of director if one has been found. You do not need to have a director before you write your proposal, but it is preferable that you have one.

Tentative Title: None yet

I am interested in writing an honors thesis on Dubliners, a collection of short stories published in 1914 by Irish writer James Joyce. I do not yet have a clear thesis, but I am interested in a set of problems in the stories that I am hoping will resolve themselves around what is basically a feminist and historical analysis. I am particularly interested in following through with work I did on this collection of stories in one of my honors seminars. In that seminar, we discussed the way that Joyce uses representations of women to narrate his anxiety over sexual fidelity and to narrate his anxiety over the national status of Ireland. My essay will try to make connections between these two issues.

My previous coursework has provided me with some introductory tools to understand the connections between representations of women in Joyce and larger issues of Irish nationalism and how it might be gendered. I will draw on some of that coursework to place Joyce's work within modernist literary experimentation, and within the social and political scene of Ireland in the early twentieth century. My close readings of the stories in Dubliners will therefore be historically based, but I anticipate focusing most of my attention on the various understandings and ideas of women in Joyce's stories. I see his representations of women as falling into two different modes—on the one hand there is the virgin and on the other there is the whore—and this division in the way women are represented should allow me to bring the issue of colonialism to bear on my analysis. One of the reasons I have chosen to work on Joyce is because I am interested in how his literary style, notorious for its difficulty and ambiguity, might help us to see how ambiguous the use of women has been in modernist writing as a whole. While my working assumption (right now, at least) is that representations of women can be broken down into two camps – virgin and whore – I believe that Joyce's narrative has such power because he was able to use that dichotomy but to complicate it as well.

I would like to focus most of my attention on close readings of Dubliners; I am not entirely sure right now which stories I will choose, but I'm sure I will look at "The Gallants" and "The Dead." I have been very influenced by The Gender of Modernism by Rita Felski, which I read for a class here, and I also plan to consult essays in Women in Joyce (ed. Suzette Henke and Elaine Unkeless) as well as other collections specifically about Joyce's interest in gender and politics.

Sample Three

Name, date, email, name of director if one has been found

Tentative Title: Crossdressing in Shakespeare

I would like to write an honors thesis that brings together two of the strongest interests I developed taking courses and then honors seminars in the English department. My first interest is in Shakespeare, especially how Shakespeare often seemed to comment on difficult social issues like race, gender, and sexuality. In the Shakespeare classes I have taken, I have become more and more interested in the ways in which different historical periods have chosen to perform Shakespeare. Each performance shows us what issues were most on the mind of the plays' producers and audiences, and they also show us the conflicts in trying to pin down one single interpretation of a person, or of a text.

My second interest is in queer theory and gender theory. I am a Women's Studies minor, and I have taken a number of cross-listed English courses, as well as a Feminist theory seminar that shaped the way that I think about how we read texts. I am especially interested in the work of Judith Butler, because her theory of performativity disrupts the naturalness of gender. Butler writes that "gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (140). By this I understand Judith Butler to argue not that gender is a performance in which one chooses the ways in which one will be a woman or a man, but that people perform gender involuntarily according to the cultural scripts of their time.

In my essay, I would like to see if I can use Butler's work to make sense of some of the issues in Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice. I would like to look at the cross-dressing in the play, an analysis that comports with the attention Judith Butler pays to drag in her book, but I anticipate that the use of Butler will be complicated by the racial and religious problems in the play. My most general question is whether or not the performances of gender and the performances of religion and race can be compared in the text of the play? Does Judith Butler's theory of performativity hold for religion and race, as well as for gender? Is something like religious conversion the equivalent of crossdressing? Or is conversion different from crossdressing in its potential to transform identity categories?