Assessment Criteria for M.A. Thesis:
Literary Studies Concentration

1. Student’s thesis demonstrates a valid and original research question.

**EXCELLENT:** The thesis represents a carefully argued, distinctive contribution to its field. It reveals detailed engagement with secondary scholarship and identifies the limits, weaknesses, and/or unexplored implications of this scholarship. It effectively articulates the relevance and importance of its own interpretation of the primary text(s).

**GOOD:** The thesis advances a coherent argument shaped by awareness of secondary scholarship in its field. Engagement with existing scholarship is detailed but is more survey-oriented than analytical in nature. Interpretation of the primary text(s) is thorough, but the distinctiveness and/or importance of this interpretation relative to existing scholarship is not always clear.

**FAIR:** The thesis follows a relatively straightforward argumentative line. Engagement with secondary scholarship is sporadic and appears, for the most part, to support specific points made in the interpretation of the primary text(s). The originality and importance of the argument are left largely for readers to discern.

**POOR:** The thesis coheres as a sustained argument, but that argument consists mainly of retreading standard or established readings of the primary text(s). Engagement with secondary scholarship is minimal and often seems like an afterthought.

**INADEQUATE:** The thesis does not advance a coherent argument nor seek to answer a discernible research question. It displays little awareness of secondary scholarship in its field. Much of the thesis consists of summarizing primary and secondary texts.

2. Student’s thesis demonstrates knowledge of major figures, genres, periods, movements in American/British/World literatures as relevant to the student’s proposed area of study.

**EXCELLENT:** The thesis demonstrates keen awareness of literary-historical context in its discussion of the primary text(s). It makes illuminating reference to relevant figures and movements in order to establish the originality and importance of its central argument. When necessary to the analysis, genre conventions and formal innovations are discussed thoroughly and capably.
GOOD: The thesis offers historical detail as a backdrop for its central argument but rarely uses that detail to advance and/or strengthen its argument. Major figures, movements, and genres are mentioned in passing, but there is no concerted effort to situate the argument relative to the innovations they represent.

FAIR: The thesis makes occasional reference to major figures, movements, and genres, but literary-historical context for the argument is generally thin. The thesis tends to rely, at key points, on its readers’ ability to supplement its presentation of literary history.

POOR: There is little engagement with literary history in the thesis. Its few references to major figures, movements, and/or genre conventions appear haphazardly and without clear bearing on the argument presented.

INADEQUATE: The thesis does not demonstrate sufficient awareness of the literary-historical context to which its argument pertains. Even rudimentary signposting of the relationship between primary text(s) and major figures, movements, and genre conventions is absent. Inaccuracies and anachronisms may be present.

3. Student’s thesis demonstrates knowledge of critical and/or theoretical approaches to reading literature and effectively applies them to the proposed area of study.

EXCELLENT: The thesis represents an accomplished and well-balanced exercise in critical analysis of its primary and secondary text(s). It carefully elaborates its critical/theoretical assumptions while also remaining attentive to the limitations and restrictions which they impose. It develops its argument through consistent application of its critical methodology while also highlighting, when relevant, the significance of alternative readings and interpretive models.

GOOD: The thesis articulates its critical/theoretical methodology and consistently applies that model to the primary text(s). It displays little awareness of the limitations or restrictions of its own methodology and is limited in its engagement with, or ability to imagine, alternative readings or interpretations. It provides a persuasive but narrow representation of the potential of critical/theoretical approaches to reading literature.

FAIR: The thesis identifies key tenets of a guiding critical/theoretical model, but much of its methodology is left unstated and becomes evident to the reader only over the course of the argument itself. There are some inconsistencies in the application of the critical
model to the primary text(s), and little if any address to alternative interpretive possibilities.

**POOR:** The guiding critical/theoretical assumptions of the thesis are mostly unstated. While there is evidence that the argument has been constructed according to a set of critical principles, those principles are not evaluated for their relevance/fitness for the text(s) at hand. Some critical principles employed in the thesis conflict with one another and generate inconsistencies and even contradictions in analysis.

**INADEQUATE:** The thesis does not reveal a coherent set of guiding critical, theoretical, or interpretive principles. Its argument is disjointed and does not appear to be the product of a consistent method for analyzing the primary text(s). Analysis consists of isolated observations and comments that bear little relationship to, and sometimes contradict, one another.