Generating Ideas for an Honors Thesis in English

Students have a tendency to think that the Honors Thesis Topic should be very broad (Women in Literature, Shakespeare, Irish Drama, The Self in the Novel); successful topics, however, usually involve defining a clear focus that combines specific literary texts with a single critical issue and a clearly defined author/genre/literary period. As you begin to formulate a topic, you will want to keep in mind that you will eventually need to answer these three questions:

1) What specific literary period, author and/or genre does it address? (Ex: 18th Century Poetry, Gothic Fiction, Contemporary Biography, The Fiction of Toni Morrison, 19th Century American Nature Writing)

2) What specific critical issues will the work address? (Ex: the construction of gender and identity, the relationship between biography and fiction, the significance of formal experimentation, the thematics of war, questions of narrative voice, the significance of historical context, poetic techniques and their relationship to content, the role of the city, psychoanalytic readings of trauma, modernism and the body)

3) What literary texts will be addressed in the project? (Ex: The poetry of Keats, Shakespeare's sonnets, Eliot's early poetry, Hemingway's war novels, Dickens's *Great Expectations* and Eliot's *Middlemarch*)

Here are **some examples** of recent honors theses in the English Department:

"Imperfect Herald: The Potent Silences of Shakespeare's Comedies"

"The Legible Child: Innocence, Shame, Ambiguity and Desire in Henry James"

"Re-Imagining the Philippines: Historical Fiction and the Filipino-American Identity Crisis"

"National Fiction: British Identity in the Novels of Sir Walter Scott"

"Brick City Renaissance? The Decline of the City of Newark in the Novels of Philip Roth"

"'The Limits of Mystery': The Grotesque in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor"

"Dickens and Collins: The Role of the Detective in Victorian England's Public and Private Worlds"

Successful honors theses often (but not always) evolve out of classes taken in the English Department. In locating a thesis advisor, your best bet is almost always to approach a professor with whom you've worked about the possibility of advising a thesis on a topic related to the work done in his or her course. The earlier you do so, the greater chance the faculty member will agree to work with you (most faculty members advise no more than one thesis at a time). Faculty members typically do not advise theses when they are on leave.

Successful theses often involve following up on existing knowledge, coursework and essays. You need not (and probably should not) feel that you are reinventing the wheel. Instead, try to locate an area of existing interest that you'd like to explore further in order to build on your knowledge base and lend depth and complexity to your ideas.

Think about developing a topic that takes advantage of your strengths as a reader, a writer and a thinker. If you are an excellent close reader, focus narrowly and design a topic that allows you to develop your ideas in depth through textual analysis. If you tend to think in overly broad terms, be wary of defining a topic too broad in scope. If you have a background in interdisciplinary training, incorporate that into your project.

Honors Thesis Worksheet 1

In order to help you to move toward defining your topic, answer the questions below:

1. List the literary authors you love:

2. List the English classes (taken in high school, at BC or elsewhere) that you have most enjoyed:

3. In what fields of literature, theoretical approaches, critical methodologies or related areas of study are you strongest, in terms of background and preparation?

4. What are your strengths as a thinker and a writer? What are your weaknesses?

5. Review the essays you've written in the major and list the issues you tend to write about in your literary critical papers (some examples are: gender, the relationship between literature and history, character psychology, race, immigration, homelessness, food, family, humor, the city, domestic space, poetic form, staging drama, author biography, etc.). Might you be able to adapt one of these topics to a thesis proposal?

5. Of the faculty you've worked with, list the English Dept. professor(s) you would most like to work with on a thesis:

6. How might you envision continuing work you've done in a class with that faculty member? (You might, for example, follow up on an elective with an in-depth study of one author you studied there, follow up on a survey course by concentrating on one issue in one literary movement, such as representations of gender in Victorian poetry or the depiction of war in British modernist fiction, or make a connection between two courses, such as thinking about race in the 18th Century Novel)